**Carmen Săpunaru Tămaş**

# Beliefs, Ritual Practices, and Celebrations in Kansai II

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## - II -

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## Contents

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**Carmen Săpunaru Tămaș (editor)** is a Romanian anthropologist, the editor of this series, and the coordinator of the Japanese language and culture program at the University of Hyogo. After obtaining her PhD from Osaka University in 2009, she has been teaching Japanese mythology and anthropology at Osaka University, Kobe University, and Doshisha University. Her most recent publications include: "Ritual Practices and Daily Rituals. Glimpses into the World of Matsuri" (Pro Universitaria 2018), "Beliefs, Ritual Practices, and Celebrations in Kansai" (Pro Universitaria 2019), and "Forms of the Body in Contemporary Japanese Society, Literature, and Culture" (edited with Irina Holca, Lexington Books 2020). She is also the author of a textbook of Japanese mythology (Osaka University 2012) and of several academic papers in Japanese and English, on topics related to the mythology and ethnology of Japan.

**Hironori Arakawa** is a Japanese anthropologist and folklorist. He currently teaches history, global studies, and international sociology at the National Institute of Technology, Akashi College. He has been interested in Japanese and Asian culture since he was an undergraduate student, and has been doing research on festivals at Kathmandu Valley in Nepal (1998), Shikoku Pilgrimage (1997-2005), and urban areas festivals in Japan (1997-present). He is currently conducting an anthropological survey on the happiness of Bhutan with sociologists and

psychologists (The Japan Society for the Promotion of Science bilateral joint seminar 2018-2020). In 1997, he started a survey on the Tōka-Ebisu "Opening of the Gate" Ceremony, his research methods including active participation: he took part in the ritual race for the "lucky man" eight times. He received his doctoral degree from Osaka University in 2015, and continues to discuss the validity of cultural anthropological methodologies in Education for international understanding (EIU).

**Mónika Kiss** is a Hungarian Japanologist and art historian, currently a lecturer at Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest, Hungary. She obtained her PhD at the same university in 2018, where she has been teaching Japanese language, religion, and art on undergraduate and graduate levels. She has been researching Japanese Buddhism and Buddhist art since her graduate studies, mainly focusing on esoteric Buddhism. She spent a year (2014/2015) at Ōtani University as a research fellow after she was awarded the Fellowship for Foreign Scholars by the Bukkyō Dendō Kyōkai (Society for the Promotion of Buddhism) as a PhD student. She was a guest researcher at the Kokusai Bukkyōgaku Daigakuin Daigaku (International College for Postgraduate Buddhist Studies) in Tokyo (2019). She has been doing research and fieldwork at Buddhist temples throughout Japan, primarily in and near Kyoto, e. g. Enryakuji, Daigoji, or Ninnaji. She is the author of several academic papers, in Hungarian and English, on topics related to Japanese esoteric Buddhism and Buddhist art.

**Noriko Onohara** is a Japanese fashion researcher. After working as a marketing researcher at a textile company, she decided to pursue her academic interest and fashion career, and obtained a Ph.D. (in Human and Environmental Studies) at Kyoto University in 2004. She joined the University of Hyogo in 2011, and has also taught at Osaka City University, Kobe University, and Osaka University. She was formerly an honorary research fellow at Anthropology Department at UCL, University of London and a visiting research fellow at the Victoria and Albert Museum, UK and at Palais Galliera, Musee de la mode de

la ville de Paris. She is the author of *Tatakau Ifuku* (Fighting Fashion) (2011, Suiseisha) and *Hito wo Kiru to Iukoto: Mind That Clothes the Body* (2020, Koyo Shobo), and also published three poetry books: *Surface Tension* (2001, Shichosha), *From Ears, Violets* (2003, highmoonoon), and *Embroidery Breath* (2009, Shinyasosho). Her current research is trans-nationality of Japanese kimono and Kesa, the Buddhist costume, especially of the Soto Zen school. She designs clothes by the use of old kimonos and explores traditional techniques of natural dyes with various local plants at the foot of Mt. Rokko, Kobe.

**Adrian O. Tămaş** is working towards his PhD in sociology at Kobe University, his research being focused on baldness in contemporary Japanese society. His most recent publication is *The Bald and the Beautiful: Perspectives on Baldness in Contemporary Japan* (in Forms of the Body in Contemporary Japanese Society, Literature and Culture. Irina Holca & Carmen Săpunaru Tămaş, Lexington 2020), and he has also published on linguistic discrimination, and nightlife in Osaka.

**Kathryn M. Tanaka** is a Japanese literary scholar who works on medical humanities. She is an associate professor at the University of Hyogo where she teaches in the Global Business Department. Her work focuses primarily on Hansen's disease and modern Japanese literature, in particular a genre of writing that became popular in the 1930s and was known as Hansen's disease literature. She has published several translations of works by one of the best-known writers of this genre, Hōjō Tamio (1914-1937) in *The Asia-Pacific Journal* (2015) and *The Annals of Dimitrie Cantemir Christian University*, Volume XXI, No 1 (2021). Her work primarily focuses on the minority experience of Hansen's disease within the Japanese empire, as she has taken up writing by children (2016), depictions of women and the experience of Hansen's disease (2016, 2019), and has a forthcoming article on patient writing in Taiwan (2022). She is currently completing a book manuscript on gender and Hansen's disease in Japan, but is also working on several medical humanities projects that take up the COVID-19 pandemic, among them some work on Amabie.

## Introduction

On a cold and windy December day in 2021, accompanied by Raluca Maria Ciolca (who deserves special thanks for having meticulously proofread the entire manuscript), I went to Sakurai City in Nara to see, and hopefully photograph, the Śākyamuni Buddha stone triad at Ishiidera. This was fieldwork on behalf of Mónika Kiss, whom the pandemic prevented from returning to Japan and collecting the necessary materials herself. I had carefully checked the route to Ishiidera, the small temple hosting the 8th century sculpture, but I had overlooked the fact that I was supposed to make an appointment with the local association (TEAM Ossaka https://team-ossaka.jimdo.com) at least one week in advance because the temple had no permanent resident. I was aware of that as we were walking from the station to Ishiidera, however, I thought we would try our luck - maybe we could see the triad from the outside? And this is how yet another series of fortunate coincidences (my research on drag queens also began as the result of a series of fortunate coincidences) started: we stopped to see a small wooden shrine on the way, greeted two gentlemen whom we met there, they inquired about the purpose of our trip, and one of them proved to be Mr. Norimasa Fujimoto,

leader of the above-mentioned association and gatekeeper. He kindly offered to open the room where the triad was kept, and did much more than that, sharing with us bits of information about the history of Ishiidera. According to the existing records, the temple had been established sometime during the Edo Period, but no records as to when the triad was created remained. He showed us the traces of lacquer behind the years of the sculpted deities, something that was believed to have been an original feature, as well as the smudges of red paint that may have been added during the Edo Period -as a joke, according to some researchers. We were invited in the temple's living room, to watch a video about the rich history of the area, which traces its origins to the oldest chronicles and stories of Japan, and also heard how the triad was taken to Tokyo National Museum in 2020, as part of an exhibition celebrating 1300 years since *Nihonshoki*, the second oldest chronicle of Japan, had been compiled.

Had I been more poetically inclined, I might have said that the guarding deities of the *Beliefs, Ritual Practices, and Celebrations in Kansai* series guided us there, but my pragmatic self sees a different meaning in the story. The keepers of tradition do not want this tradition to be lost, they want it perpetuated and known to as many people as possible. Mr. Fujimoto was more than happy to share all his knowledge with us, and to offer us access to the sources in his possession, not only because it was for research, but because he understood that this project is a way of continuing his work. Gûji Hajime Torii from Yasui Konpira Shrine also stated that he wants the relatively new tradition of Kushi Matsuri to

endure, and that he hopes these practices will not be forgotten. I believe that the purpose of this series, besides explaining certain practices associated with religious beliefs in contemporary Japanese society, is to create an easily accessible database that may be of use to scholars, historians, and even practitioners.

The contributors to this volume come from various cultures and continents (Japan, Europe - Hungary and Romania, and the United States), as well as various specialized fields (anthropology, art history, fashion, cultural studies and literature), which means that they have at their disposal a wide array of research and analysis tools. All chapters focus on contemporary society, with Hironori Arakawa and Kathryn M. Tanaka writing on phenomena that could be observed during 2021 (the second pandemic year), Mónika Kiss and Noriko Onohara analyzing data collected before the pandemic, while Adrian O. Tămaș and Carmen Săpunaru Tămaș refer to mythical narratives re-enacted and re-interpreted in the 21st century.

In the first volume of this series (*Beliefs, Ritual Practices, and Celebrations in Kansai*, Pro Universitaria 2020), Hironori Arakawa wrote about the *ichiban-fuku* race at Nishinomiya Shrine, a practice performed during the Ebisu Matsuri, and how economic and historical developments influenced the ritual process. In this second volume he refers again to Nishinomiya Shrine, this time reviewing the changes brought about by the pandemic in comparison to the way the various ceremonies were conducted in previous years. Considering the fact that rituals are generally seen as immutable events (in fact, changes do occur, but in general they are too slight to

observe with the "naked eye" from one year to the other), this chapter is particularly important as it emphasizes the way events and celebrations that are highly significant from a religious and community perspective were adjusted in order to conform with an environment affected by a contagious disease, and regulated by government ordinances. He also compares the "restraint" imposed by sanitary measures in 2021 with the "self-restraint" caused by the demise of the Showa Emperor in 1989, an aspect that sheds light on how people who organize and conduct rituals act as agents of change historical and social events dictate it.

Kathryn M. Tanaka's chapter also refers to the Covid-19 years, this time not discussing changes, but innovation. The 21st century pandemic resurrected a fairly obscure Japanese mythical creature, Amabie, and turned it into a nationwide phenomenon. "Amabie as Play in Kansai" is an ethnography and a netnography of the rise of Amabie from a not particularly famous *yôkai* to a pop culture sensation, with the author suggesting that this popularity comes from the fact that Amabie was used as a ludic way of coping with the restrictions imposed by the pandemic, and the suffering it caused.

Mónika Kiss and Noriko Onohara discuss Buddhist material culture and practices associated with it from the perspectives of the art historian and fashion researcher. Mónika Kiss looks at various Buddhist statues using the tools of religious art history, but her chapter is not limited to descriptions of artifacts and interpretation of symbols - she also attempts to clarify whether the Buddhist stone images found in the countryside can be classified as art works, or whether they

are only objects of worship. From an anthropological perspective this is a very hard distinction to make, and not always a necessary one, as an object that some view as art may simply be a daily tool for others, or a very important sacred object. The author's conclusion is that these statues, well known by most Japanese people, as they can often be found in the countryside, are the "product of a unique combination of Japanese religious thought and practice," and still remain a tool of ritual and worship in contemporary society.

Noriko Onohara's chapter is a personal anthropology, describing a researcher's path to ritual practice. Combining the author's background in fashion studies and her personal interest in Buddhist meditation techniques, the paper analyzes an item of clothing, *kesa*, from the perspective of Buddhist ideology and practice. Noriko Onohara sees *kesa* as "a garment that uses the body as a medium to express the heart of the Buddha and teachings of the Dharma which cannot be seen with the eye," in other words, as an instrument that can be used repeatedly to achieve purification of the body and soul, and advancement on the path to illumination.

The chapter I contributed to started with my husband's research on baldness in contemporary society, and my desire to see if there were any mythical sources we could refer to. Any ritual practices would be related, of course, to the prevention of baldness - a natural but universally feared biological development - and our analysis tried to elucidate any potential connection to mythical narratives. The conclusion was that contemporary practitioners either forgot, or were

never aware of the ancient stories glorifying the magical power of hair, basing their initiatives of creating and preserving ceremonies on the persistent human need for ritual.

Defined as social acts, rituals "are powerful forces that bring participants to accept a common social and moral order that transcends their status as individuals. By reinforcing group norms, they bring about homogeneity. A uniformity of beliefs helps bind people together and reinforces group identity." (Marvin Harris & Orna Johnson. 2007. *Cultural Anthropology*. Pearson Education p. 278-279) I believe that the chapters included in this second volume bring more than sufficient proof to support this definition, and to demonstrate how ritual practice is an absolutely necessary human act that may change and evolve, but whose essential structure and purpose remain the same.

(*To be continued*)

**Carmen Săpunaru Tămaş**

# A Study on the Continuation of Tradition at Urban Area Festivals during the Coronavirus Crisis: from the Perspective of "Nishinomiya Matsuri" and the "Choosing the Lucky Men at the Opening of the Gate Ceremony" at Nishinomiya Shrine in Hyogo Prefecture

*Hironori ARAKAWA*

## 1. Introduction

The present paper focuses on festivals which conducted and (as a result) made possible the continuation of local festivities amid the increase in coronavirus infections. The paper first provides a detailed account of the establishment of these festivals and the manner in which they were conducted before the coronavirus crisis, and then reports on and analyzes the actual form under which they were performed this year, as well as the reasons behind that form.

The festival at the center of this paper is Nishinomiya Matsuri, conducted at Nishinomiya Shrine in Nishinomiya City, Hyogo Prefecture. It is traditionally held for three days,

between September 21 and 23, and it centers around the *reisai* (annual festival), regarded as the most important among the events of the shrine. Starting from a description of the events behind the establishment of this festival and its characteristics, my goal is to depict the manner in which it was performed this year, by presenting the record of the survey I conducted through participant observation, as well as the interviews I conducted with the participants.

One of the deities celebrated at Nishinomiya Shrine is Ebisu (Ebisu Ōkami), and the festival which attracts the highest number of pilgrims in search for good fortune during the year is the Tōka-Ebisu, conducted between January 9 and 11. The "Choosing the Lucky Men at the Opening of the Gate Ceremony", held at 6 a.m. on January 10, can be regarded as the most important event of the festival. It is a ritual well known not only in the Hanshin area, but also at national level, due to reports in various media. However, there were also years when Nishinomiya Shrine considered not holding this event, due to the presence of a voluntary restraint mood, brought about by various circumstances. For example, albeit different in type from this coronavirus crisis, the interval between the New year and the Tōka-Ebisu in 1989 (Shōwa 64 – Heisei 1) was such a "time of voluntary restraint". Nevertheless, although with some changes in form, the Tōka-Ebisu was held that year. I will analyze the exact reasons and the manner in which it was held, by presenting newspaper sources of the time.

The current coronavirus crisis, brought about mainly by sanitary reasons, is different from the situation in the year

1989 (Shōwa 64 – Heisei 1), which was caused by political and social reasons. However, when considering the organization of festivals at Nishinomiya Shrine, the two periods are similar in terms of the Shrine's decision to "not cancel, but conduct and, as a result, continue the festivities". Distinctive features associated with the Ebisu belief may also be involved, but, when it comes to the reasons why these two festivals could be continued and the significance behind their continuation or organization, I have come to also believe that it may be possible to identify universal characteristics, which apply to festivals or pilgrimages in other areas as well.

When my writing of this paper is completed, it will be precisely the time of the Tōka-Ebisu. Unfortunately, as of December 2020, there is no improvement in the situation of coronavirus infections, and the number of positive cases is growing. I will provide a detailed account of the matters discussed by those involved in the festival at Nishinomiya Shrine, and I will also analyze the efforts for "continuing the tradition" which are in progress at present.

## 2. Festivals during the coronavirus crisis

From the end of 2019, the novel coronavirus (SARS coronavirus 2) caused the appearance of an infectious disease (COVID-19) globally, and even as of October 2020, infections are rising in all parts of the world, including Japan. Globally, along with the rush to develop a treatment, various prevention strategies have been adopted in order to prevent infections. In Japan, the Prime Minister's Official Residence and the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare put forward

the “3Cs” slogan. It became a request for the entire Japan to avoid “Closed spaces”, “Crowded places” and “Close-contact settings”, in order to prevent the spread of infections as much as possible.

Following this request, at Akashi National College of Technology as well, the policy to reduce in-person interactions, including classes, as much as possible was considered, and in-person classes starting from April were cancelled, while the implementation of online classes started in May. Since the curriculum can involve many experiments and practical training, in-person classes were implemented from July, but they are being held under a format with sufficient consideration for the infection prevention measures of “thoroughly washing hands, wearing a mask, ensuring ventilation and avoiding crowded spaces as much as possible”.

When looking at Japan in its entirety, a voluntary limitation of movement has been implemented on a large scale, the decrease in the occupancy rates of public transportation facilities becoming obvious, and situations such as a reduction in service by said facilities occurring. At the same time, the food service industry and the tourism industry have also been affected by a decrease in use, with the government deciding to implement the Emergency Economic Measures to Cope with COVID-19, under the name of “Go To Campaign”. Following the “Go to Travel” for the revitalization of the travel industry and the “Go To Eat” for the revitalization of the food industry, the “Go to Event” for the revitalization of events and entertainment, and the “Go to Shopping Street” for the revitalization of regional economies

are also planned from October 2020. From October, Tokyo (area and residents) was also included in the "Go To Travel" and, although the number of users has still not reached that before the spread of infections, a further increase is expected and there are also reports that, in fact, in all tourist areas high numbers of people have brought the liveliness back.

However, with events that involve a high number of people gathering and, thus, forming a crowd as the main example, it seems difficult to completely return to the society before the spread of infections. When it comes to local festivals, the object of my survey, there have been, inevitably, many cancellations or postponements due to the increase in infections after the beginning of 2020. For example, inevitably, Kyoto's Gion Matsuri, which is considered a representative festival of Japan, Hakata's Yamakasa, and others have been cancelled, while Asakusa's Sanja Matsuri has been postponed. Similarly, Kitakyushu's "Kokura Gion Daiko"[1], where I conducted a survey, has been postponed this year.

In this paper, I focus on Nishinomiya Matsuri, a festival which, although with changes in form, was "conducted", instead of being "cancelled or postponed" as in the aforementioned cases. Specifically, while usually conducted for three days, it was shortened and conducted for one day, September 22. This festival has been the object of my research for approximately 20 years, as I started my survey around the time of its establishment (more specifically, its revival). I have been actively involved in the festival, regarding it not only as a

[1] Kitakyūshū-shi bunkazai chōsa hōkokusho dai-158-shū (Kitakyushu City Cultural Properties Survey Report 158). "Kokura Gion Daiko". Kitakyūshū-shi Kyōiku Iinkai (Kitakyushu City Board of Education). October 2010.

research object, but also as a practical opportunity to connect the university or college and the local community.

So far, numerous sources in various fields, such as sociology, folklore studies, and cultural anthropology, have stated that festivals have the function of maintaining the bonds within the local communities, and I have also demonstrated this through qualitative and quantitative surveys. It is certain that festivals are an indispensable element for the local community. During this unprecedented coronavirus crisis, it is essential to strengthen the bonds of the local residents. Nevertheless, throughout the country, there have been, unavoidably, numerous suspensions and cancellations. After the end of summer, in September, the coronavirus crisis slightly calmed, and there is also movement for conducting postponed festivals, such as Sanja Matsuri. Precisely, it is being determined that there is meaning in conducting festivals, even while constantly thinking about the risk of infection, as is the case at present.

I believe that the example of Nishinomiya Matsuri, which could be conducted in the Hanshin area without delay, on a comparatively large scale, can significantly serve as reference when considering the appropriate form for holding festivals in the "Post-Corona, With-Corona" society. In Section 3, I will present the form under which this festival is conducted, the events behind its establishment, its characteristics and other details, and in Section 4 I will report on the actual manner in which it was performed this year.

## 3. An overview of Nishiomiya Matsuri (form, events behind establishment, characteristics)

Nishinomiya Matsuri is usually conducted for three days every year, between September 21 and 23. On the 22nd, the most important event at Nishinomiya Shrine, the *reisai* (annual festival) is conducted, between the *yoimiyasai* (festival-eve ceremony) held on the 21st and the *togyosai* (procession ceremony) held on the 23rd.

The detailed schedule is as follows: after the *yoimiyasai* is performed by the priest at five o'clock in the afternoon on the 21st, performances and lotteries [2] are held as offerings to the deities. On the 22nd, after the *reisai* at 10 a.m., the *chigo gyōretsu* (festival children's procession) and approximately 30 *kodomo taru mikoshi* (children's barrel carriage) from the parishioner district parade through the central shopping street and other places inside the city. On the 23rd, the *togyosai* is held. In the morning, the *mikoshi* (sacred portable shrine) and the *jidai gyōretsu* (historical procession) go around the parishioners' designated area (at present, the elementary school district is at the center), and from noon, moving to the New Nishinomiya Yacht Harbor, those involved in the festival board a convoy of around seven boats and parade around Nishinomiya Hama. *Kaza matsuri*, a ceremony to pray for safety at sea, is performed by the priest in the open sea area of Omaehama. Only one boat sails to Wadamisaki in Hyogo and performs the *ubumiyamairi*, returning to the birth place of the deity Ebisu. Once every ten

[2] This lottery, also called "Fukubiki", is held when local people gather at the shrine and festival officials draw lots with numbers on them, and the winners receive prizes, especially goods.

years, all the ships leave Nishinomiya Harbor and visit Wadamisaki, with all those involved in the festival performing the *ubumiyamairi* (Image 1). Throughout these three days, the members of the young parishioners' association Wakaebisukai walk around Nishinomiya city and the area of Wadamisaki in Kobe.

Image 1: *Ubumiyamairi* by all the participants in the festival (2009)

The *kaijō togyo* (sea procession) originates in the enshrinement legend of the Nishinomiya Shrine. The legend states that, in the olden days, a fisherman from Naruo (currently, the West part of Nishinomiya City) was fishing in the open sea area of Wadamisaki, in present-day Hyogo District of Kobe City, and a statue of the deity Ebisu got caught in his net. He brought it back to Naruo and worshipped it, and then took it to the area of Nishinomiya Shrine. The *shinkō*

(transfer procession), or the *funa togyo* (boat procession), to Wadamisaki, which involves returning to the birthplace of the deity Ebisu, was taken over as the liveliest ceremony of Nishinomiya Shrine in the Middle Ages, but it was discontinued as a result of Oda Nobunaga's confiscating the shrine land. After that, only the ritual part was performed, but in 1954 (Shōwa 29) the parade of the *mikoshi gyōretsu* (procession of the sacred portable shrine) inside Nishinomiya City, or the *riku togyo* (land procession), was revived. However, after the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake of 1995 (Heisei 7), it was suspended. In 2000 (Heisei 12), a revival came into sight, and it was decided to hold the *kaijō funa togyo* (sea procession by boats, Image 2) after approximately 400 years.

Image 2: *Kaijō funa togyo* (2017)

A characteristic of this festival is found in the extensive cooperation of not only the local neighborhood association,

the parishioners' organization, and the young parishioners' association, which are at the center of performing many local festivals, but also of people from neighboring universities (at present, including Akashi National College of Technology). This has become remarkable especially from the time of the *kaijō togyo* revival of 2000 (Heisei 12). One of the reasons might be the fact that the festival itself grew and more manpower become necessary, but Toshinao Yoneyama, at the time a researcher of festivals such as Gion Matsuri, taking up the position of president at the neighboring Ōtemae University also played a significant role. After becoming university president in 1997, in April of 1998, Yoneyama gathered researchers and students from the various fields of history, architecture, literature, cultural anthropology, and geography and founded the "Ebisu Belief Research Society", starting academic research. As a result, the links with Nishinomiya Shrine grew stronger as well, and following Ōtemae University, students and teaching staff from Shukugawa Junior College (at the time), Kobe College, and Mukogawa Women's University became involved in the festivals at Nishinomiya Shrine, including Nishinomiya Matsuri[3].

At the time of the revival of 2000, I was a graduate student and, in the beginning, I conducted research while boarding a boat prepared especially for news coverage, my role being that of video-recording the events, together with reporters from newspaper companies and television stations. However, as the years went by, my relationship with those

[3] At one point, many boats for those related to the universities also attended.

involved in the festival deepened, and I was also invited to carry the *mikoshi*, an event I took part in for several years. My personal connection to the festival led to a large number of students from Hyogo Prefecture universities (Kwansei Gakuin University, Konan University, Kobe University, and others) also participating.

Image 3: Technical college students and faculty members at Nishinomiya Matsuri (2019)

Image 4: *Riku togyo* with the help of students and faculty members (2018)

After I became a technical college faculty member, and I actually began my research based on practice at the Tōka-Ebisu in 2010, the technical college students who expressed their interest also started to take part in the festival events[4] (Images 3 and 4).

Thus, the festival, which in usual cases is often conducted based solely on local connections, through the distinctive characteristic of engaging locations and even researchers, has come to include priests, local connections – the neighborhood association, the young parishioners' association, and so on, social connections – the Ebisu Kōsha (Ebisu Association), the Mikoshi Hōsan Kōsha (Sacred Portable Shrine Support Association), the Kaimon Shinji Kōsha (Opening of the Gate Ceremony Association), and so on, school connections – various universities and technical colleges, and even connections with foreign residents through the participation of the Nishinomiya City International Association (NIA). Certainly, it has managed to develop as a unique festival, where people with all types of connections come together at once.

## 4. Holding Nishinomiya Matsuri during the coronavirus crisis

In 2020, a year hit by the coronavirus crisis, the pros and cons of holding Nishinomiya Matsuri were discussed, with the focus on Nishinomiya Shrine, which is at the center

[4] At present, participation in the festivals throughout the year, including the Opening of the Gate Ceremony, is being implemented under the form of local cooperation, as a student project.

of its organization. As a result, the option of "conducting it while reducing its scale" was selected.

Specifically, it was decided to reduce the festival schedule from 3 days to 1 day, and to cancel the *yoimiyasai* and the *danjiri* (sacred float) parade. For the *reisai* and the *togyosai* as well, it was decided that only those involved in the rituals, mainly comprising the priests, the local neighborhood association, and the Mikoshi Hōsan Kōsha, which includes a large number of local residents, would participate.

At 10 a.m. on the 22nd, the *reisai*, which is regarded as the most important among the annual events of Nishinomiya Shrine, was performed. After the *hatsuyosai* (departing ritual) and the *kangyosai* (returning ritual) were held at the main shrine at 1:30 p.m., the *mikoshi* was placed on a truck which had been prepared on the shrine grounds and the festival participants got on busses, heading to the New Nishinomiya Yacht Harbor. There, after moving to the *gozabune* (pleasure boat) and leaving the Yacht Harbor at 2:50 p.m., the *kaijō funa togyo* started. The *kaijō togyo* was not different in route from those of previous years. However, usually it would start after the *hatsuyosai* and the *kangyosai* were performed in the morning at the main shrine and the *jidai gyōretsu* and the *mikoshi* went around the parishioners' district (each designated area: based on the current school district). It was clear that, by eliminating the *riku togyo*, contact between people was reduced as much as possible. When moving from the main shrine to the shrine grounds as well, each of the participants in the parade was careful to stay at a distance (Image 5), and it was made obligatory for all those involved

with the *mikoshi* to wear masks ordered especially for the festival[5] (Image 6).

Image 5: Keeping distance during the *shinkō* in historical attire as well (2020)

Image 6: Members of the Mikoshi Hōsan Kōsha wearing masks (2020)

[5] I was told that the items called *fukumen* and *kuchiōi*, which have been used at the Shrine with the original purpose of avoiding the priest's breath reaching the *shintai* (object of worship) during religious service, were repurposed for this use.

In previous years, approximately 60 members would carry the *mikoshi*, but their number was reduced to half, that is 30 members. For the *shinkō* in historical attire, there were no more student helpers, and the number of participants, such as *yaotome* (shrine lady) and those holding the *shugasa* (red umbrella), was reduced. According to the statement issued by the Shrine, the number of participants in the *togyo shinkō* ceremonies was reduced from more than 282 last year to 63. When it comes to the *kaijō togyo*, last year a convoy of 7 boats was prepared, since visitors also participated. The detailed capacity of the boats was as follows: patrol boat 1 – 20 seats, *gozabune* – 50 seats, patrol boat 2 – 10 seats, *gubusen* 1 (accompanying boat) – 50 seats, *gubusen* 2 – 50 seats, visitors' boat 1 – 200 seats, visitors' boat 2 – 100 seats, a maximum of 480 seats. This year, there were no visitors' boats. A total of 6 boats participated, including the one which sailed to Wadamisaki in Kobe for the *ubumiyamairi* – 13 seats. The other five were: patrol boat 1 – 5 seats, s*akibaraibune* (leading boat) – 50 seats, *gozabune* – 50 seats, *gubushasen* (accompanying participants' boat) – 50 seats, patrol boat 2 – 5 seats. There was a reduction in the number of participants as well, as seen from the seating total of 173. In fact, I was on the *gozabun*e, but everything was conducted while sitting separately, at a distance (Image 7), so I only joined those who took part in the *togyosai*.

Image 7: Sitting at a distance on the *gozabune* (2020)

Usually, *kaza matsuri* is performed by the *yaotome* (Image 8), but this time it was performed by other participants in the festival (Image 9).

Image 8: *Kaza matsuri* performed by the *yaotome* (2017)

Image 9: *Kaza matsuri* performed by festival participants (2020)

In recent years, after the *kaza matsuri*, there has been a performance of the Ebisu-mai (Ebisu puppet dance). The Ebisu-mai is a dance performed by *kugutsu-shi* (puppeteers), initially a puppet performance that can be regarded as the origin of Ningyō Jōruri (puppet play) and Bunraku (puppet theatre) and is believed to have originated at Nishinomiya Shrine. It is a folk performing art that went beyond the Setouchi area and spread to Awajishima or Tokushima Prefecture. Until last year, there was a performance contest between the "Awaji-ningyō-geibu-gumi", the group of alumni and alumnae of the Local Performing Arts Club at Nandan Junior Highschool in Minami Awaji City and the "Ningyō-shibai-Ebisu-za" from Nishinomiya. This year, there was a display by the Ningyō-shibai-Ebisu-za only, with its leader, Ms. Hidemi Takechi, giving a splendid performance while also weaving the message of *Ekibyō mo taisan* ("May the plague disappear") into the auspicious dance (Image 11).

Image 10: Ebisu-mai by the Awaji-ningyō-geibu-gumi (2018)

Image 11: Ebisu-mai by Ms. Takechi in the open sea area of Omaehama (2020)

After this, we returned to the Yacht Harbor, left the Harbor shortly after 5 p.m., and the *kangyosai* was performed at approximately 5:40 p.m. Thus, Nishinomiya Matsuri was

successfully completed. Usually, at the end of the festival there would be a *naorai* (feast), but this year it was cancelled to avoid crowding. The *naorai* of Nishinomiya Matsuri is a big event where people with all types of connections, which were previously mentioned, come together in one place. In recent years, it was so popular that arranging seats not only in the assembly hall at Nishinomiya Shrine Kaikan, which is used as a wedding venue, but even in the hallways, was not enough (Image 12).

Image 12: *Naorai* with the participation of that year's *fuku-otoko* (2017)

During this event, precisely the exchange of different connections would take place. However, not only those related to the Shrine, but also those who were involved in and were present at the festival predominantly expressed the opinion that "This year it couldn't be helped" in the interviews I conducted. Thus, it is particularly remarkable that, albeit with a reduction in scale and the cancellation of some of the events, the Shrine succeeded in holding the *reisai*,

which it most wanted to hold, and in conducting the *kaijō funa togyo*, although on a smaller scale. The participants too were mostly of the opinion that they wished for the festival itself to continue being held, so it could be observed that they had a feeling of satisfaction about having been able to conduct it, even if on a reduced scale, during this time of voluntary restraint. I strongly felt that, after all, in the local community, festivals are necessary in order to confirm and to strengthen bonds, starting with local connections. It can be stated that it is necessary to continue festivals, even if changing their form.

### 5. The Tōka-Ebisu of 1989

It is my opinion that, from the various festivals of Nishinomiya Shrine, two events can be regarded as having resulted in great success in this context of a "continuation": continuing to hold the Tōka-Ebisu during the time of voluntary restraint at the transition from the Shōwa Era to the Heisei Era, and carrying out the "Choosing the Lucky Men", which transformed into a Shinto ritual (*shinji*) and has been attracting the most attention. In fact, as far as I could confirm, the phrase "Choosing the Lucky Men at the Opening of the Gate Ceremony" cannot be found in newspaper sources from the Shōwa Era. It was only referred to through terms such as "Lucky Men Race", "Opening of the Gate Competition", or "First Shrine Visitor". In other words, it may be stated that, with the Shōwa and the Heisei eras as a turning point, it became widespread to refer to the race which took place when the gate opened as the "Choosing the Lucky Men at the Opening of the Gate Ceremony".

Since January 10 of 1989 (Heisei 1) was only three days after the death of the Shōwa Emperor, I conducted interviews with the Shrine officials, inquiring about the situation of the time, and I was told that, in fact, there had been discussions of the voluntary restraint, or even the cancellation of the Tōka-Ebisu itself. I will attempt to depict the way in which Nishinomiya Shrine managed to overcome that year's voluntary restraint mood, by referring to the newspapers of the time. First, I will present the Asahi Shimbun's Hanshin edition, dated January 10, 1989 (Heisei 1).

First shrine visit of the New Year Nishinomiya, Shake-chō, Nishinomiya City

> The shrine welcomed 346.000 people on the first day of the year, with approximately 522.000 people making their first visit over the three days, thus surpassing the anticipated number of 450.000 by 16%. Mr. Akira Nishii, the representative of General Affairs, explains: "Since the deity Ebisu is closely connected to prosperity in business, safety for the family, praying for a good fish catch, and our daily life, there was, perhaps, no impact from the voluntary restraint mood." With the stock average jumping over 30.000 yen, the Shrine was filled with people bringing their hands together to give thanks for this period of prosperity and pray for good fortune in the new year as well.

The first three days of the year were before the death of the Shōwa Emperor, but during a time when a general voluntary restraint mood had been in the air. It is very

interesting that, despite this, more people than the Shrine had anticipated were actually present for the first visit of the new year. After the death of the Shōwa Emperor on January 7, such a voluntary restraint mood was in the atmosphere, starting with the concern regarding the measures for going into mourning, with the administration at the center, and followed by actions such as cancelling concerts or halting the operation of large entertainment equipment at amusement parks such as Hanshin Park and Takarazuka Family Land. For this reason, the comment from Nishinomiya Shrine that "for the first visit of the year, more pilgrims than usual were present" stands out. Then, in the Asahi Shimbun's Hanshin edition of January 9, the following article was published under the title "Bless our business with prosperity! The day of Tōka-Ebisu".

> On the 10th, the gate opens at the signal given by the large *taiko* drum at 6 a.m. When the gate opens, the pilgrims all at once run towards the main shrine, led by the belief in the good fortune brought by the first shrine visit of the New Year. There is a ceremony to decide the three *fuku-otoko* (lucky men), who become *ichiban-fuku* (first among the lucky), *niban-fuku* (second among the lucky) and *sanban-fuku* (third among the lucky), in the order of their arrival. They are offered statues of the deity Ebisu and gifts. Due to the current mourning period, the kagura dance is cancelled, but except for that, it is likely that the crowds of "*Shōbai hanjō sasa motte koi!*" ("Come for Ebisu lucky bamboo and be blessed with business prosperity!") will be present, as usual.

The approach Nishinomiya Shrine took in choosing "an almost unchanged Tōka-Ebisu" amid a general voluntary restraint mood is very interesting. In Asahi Shimbun, this is the point when the *fuku-otoko* race is referred to as "ceremony" (*shinji*) for the first time. From Asahi, Yomiuri, Kobe, and Mainichi, all except for Kobe Shimbun started to call this event "ceremony" after this point in 1989. In Kobe Shimbun, the evening edition of January 10, 1986 mentions the "traditional 'first *fuku-otoko*'", and the evening edition of January 10, 1986 mentions the "pilgrims' race at the main Ebisu", with it being clearly specified that this event takes place after the *igomori* (seclusion) ceremony. In fact, it was not until the morning edition of January 11, 1988 that the expression "from the ceremony of choosing the '*fuku-otoko*', this year as well" appeared. It was used under the form of the *igomori* ceremony extending to the start of the race. Below I present the January 10, 1989 articles from Asahi Shimbun and Kobe Shimbun.

Kobe Shimbun

It's the *ichiban-fuku* of the first year of Heisei Nishinomiya Shrine

With their "*ebisu-gao*" (jolly face like Ebisu's), three hundred compete

On the 10th, the day of the main Ebisu festival, at Nishinomiya Shrine (Shake-chō, Nishinomiya City), the traditional opening of the gate ceremony of "Choosing the Lucky Men" was held. Although the part in which the three *fuku-otoko* break open the barrel (*kagami-biraki*) and offer the sake to the pilgrims

was cancelled, the moment the gate opened at 6 a.m., as usual, three hundred people vigorously raced through the shrine grounds, aiming for the *ichiban-fuku* in the first year of Heisei.

Asahi Shimbun

At Nishinomiya Shrine of Shake-chō in Nishinomiya City, the gate opened at 6 a.m. Around three hundred pilgrims entered the shrine grounds. They ran the approximately two hundred meters to the main shrine. From the opening of the gate ceremony, during which the *fuku-otoko* are decided, the opening of the barrel (*kagami-biraki*) and sake offering, held by the *fuku-otoko* in front of the main shrine, were cancelled.

Asahi Shimbun does not use the term including "choosing" (*erabi*), which makes its first appearance in the newspaper in 1993 (Heisei 5) – the morning Hanshin edition of January 11. Nonetheless, the creation of the term can be inferred from the fact that "ceremony" is mentioned in both these articles from 1989 (Heisei 1). This was also the case for Mainichi Shimbun (the morning Hanshin North-West edition of January 11) and Yomiuri Shimbun (the morning edition of January 11). For example, in Yomiuri Shimbun there is mention of the "'Choosing the Lucky Men' ceremony, in which the pilgrims compete to arrive first at the shrine and receive the *ichiban-fuku*", with both these newspapers including the words "ceremony" (*shinji*) and "choosing" (*erabi*), which did not appear in previous years. In Yomiuri Shimbun's morning Hanshin edition of January 10, there is the following article in relation to the creation of the term.

Held as usual Grand festival *kagura* cancelled

> On the eve of the Ebisu grand festival, at Nishinomiya Shrine in Shake-chō, Nishinomiya City, the turnout of pilgrims was low, due to the influence of the Emperor's death, but in the afternoon the bustle returned, with crowds coming in pursuit of good luck for the first year of Heisei. The Shrine, deeming the "shrine grand festival" to be a Shintō ceremony (*shinji*), is holding it as usual. However, it has cancelled the *kagura*, held at the pilgrims' request, and asked the vendors at the stalls from the shrine grounds and its vicinity to refrain from loudly calling out to customers. During the morning, on the immense forty thousand square meters shrine grounds, people were scarce. Even the group from the Katata Fishery Cooperative in Shirahama Town, Wakayama Prefecture, who used to visit every year before the opening of the gate at 6 a.m. in pursuit of the *ichiban-fuku,* went into mourning and cancelled their pilgrimage. Nevertheless, in the afternoon, after the children had finished their class opening ceremony and returned home, the place became animated, with more parents visiting together with their children. Smiling, the owner (42) of a teahouse in Takarazuka City says: "I prayed to Ebisu for business prosperity in the new era."

What can be grasped from the article is that, although there were also organizations to conduct mourning, many people came to the shrine in pilgrimage, as usual. Moreover, the aspect that deserves particular attention is the Shrine's policy to hold the "shrine grand festival", since "it is a Shintō ceremony (*shinji*)". Most probably, since "the deity Ebisu is closely connected to prosperity in business, safety for the

family, praying for a good fish catch, and our daily life", as mentioned above, the Shrine thought it necessary to hold the Tōka-Ebisu, which is the main festival related to the deity. It may be concluded that, by placing emphasis on the "belief/ceremony" dimension, the Shrine made it possible to carry out the festival in an atmosphere of generalized voluntary restraint mood. This is precisely why it can be stated that the *fuku-otoko* competition, which the Shrine similarly decided to hold, transitioned to the name "Opening of the Gate Ceremony". It is very interesting that the previously mentioned Kobe Shimbun article from 1988 makes its report using "ceremony" to refer to the events including the race after the *igomori* ceremony as well. However, it may also be said that the Shrine consciously undertook this extended interpretation of "ceremony" in the following year in order to overcome the voluntary restraint mood.

It is also worth noting that, in Kobe Shimbun's evening edition of January 10, 1989 (Heisei 1) it is written that at Osaka's Imamiya Ebisu Shrine, the main Ebisu festival was carried out while, unfortunately, refraining from holding the *hoe-kago* (basket palanquin parade), a symbol of the season [6].

[6] Also due to its being located in Osaka, Imamiya Ebisu Shrine boasted the largest number of pilgrims at the Tōka-Ebisu. There was also an abundance of newsworthy events, such as the *hoe-kago* with *geisha* from Minami Shinchi or the "Miss *Fuku-musume* Contest" (Miss Lucky Maiden Contest), which was started following the "boom in beauty contests" from the Shōwa 20's. However, from the 2010's, the rate of the "Choosing the Lucky Men" being featured in television and other media reports has become higher, and the level of awareness on the Tōka-Ebisu at Nishinomiya Shrine is high as well, not only in the Kansai area, but also in the entire country. It can be concluded that the creation of the term "Choosing the Lucky Men at the Opening of the Gate Ceremony" had an influence on various different aspects such as the number of pilgrims or the level of awareness, through the Heisei Era (1989-2019).

The expression may have been created for convenience, but it can be said that its subsequently going on to rapidly become established under the term “ceremony” in the newspapers could be accomplished precisely because the festivals were continued, regardless of it being a time of voluntary restraint.

### 6. “Choosing the Lucky Men at the Opening of the Gate Ceremony” in January 2021

After Nishinomiya Matsuri ended in the last part of September, the various organizations related to Nishinomiya Shrine gathered and discussions were held on the pros and cons of conducting the Tōka-Ebisu and the Choosing the Lucky Men at the Opening of the Gate Ceremony, scheduled to take place in January 2021. For the Shrine, the most important festival is “Nishinomiya Matsuri”, but the “Tōka-Ebisu”, which is said to welcome a number of pilgrims surpassing 1 million during the three days between the 9th and the 11th, is a major scale pilgrimage event, even when considering the Kansai area. Therefore, numerous organizations are involved. Especially considering the fact that the Choosing the Lucky Men at the Opening of the Gate Ceremony, held at 6 a.m. on the 10th, is attracting attention throughout the country, the pros and cons of holding it were carefully decided.

The general meeting including the Kaimon Shinji Kōsha, which among the various organizations is at the center of performing the Opening of the Gate Ceremony, was first held on October 13. The decision made during this meeting was “to carry out the Choosing the Lucky Men at the Opening of the Gate Ceremony while maintaining distance”.

Specifically, it was decided to cancel the lottery for deciding the positions in the running pilgrimage race,[7] which was held from the 9th on the premises. Until the 9th of January 2020, out of approximately 1500 people wishing to participate in the ceremony, a total of 258 people (108 people in the front row group, 150 people in the 2nd group) were selected to run from the front of the Red Gate to the Shrine. Although held outside, having this event would result in forming a "crowd", so it was decided to switch to applications being sent by post in advance. Furthermore, limiting the number of those who would enter the race in front of the Red Gate to 80 people, it was planned to hold the Choosing the Lucky Men Ceremony with distance being maintained during the start phase.

Image 13: Starting positions written in front of the Red Gate (January 10, 2019)

[7] The operation of the lottery started in 2005. Before that, the criterion was the order of arrival at the Red Gate. Around 2003, the number of participants who would line up days in advance grew, and in 2004 there was a flood of criticism over the method of choosing the first positions as groups, so the change to drawing lots was made. Fifteen years later, as of 2020, this is established as a tradition.

On December 4, a preliminary meeting was held, with representatives from security and the local neighborhood association also participating, and the changes mentioned above were approved. As a matter of fact, it was decided that the public call for postal applications to the lottery would start from mid-November and close on the 15th of December, and that the "Ritual to pray for the safe completion of the Opening of the Gate Ceremony and the Preliminary lottery draw" would take place on the 17th.

Nevertheless, the spread of coronavirus infections did not subside, with the number of positive cases continuing to grow. The government announced the intention to temporarily suspend the "Go To Travel" project throughout the country, for the interval between December 28 and January 11 of next year. As a result, in response to this declaration, Nishinomiya Shrine officially announced on the 16th that it will cancel the "Choosing the Lucky Men". This announcement made by the Shrine was widely featured in all the media, including the Internet, and had a big social impact as well. There were also voices to lament the fact that the Choosing the Lucky Men cannot be held, but, in general, there were also many opinions expressing that it could not be helped.

However, what I would like to point out is that the Shrine "cancelled choosing the *fuku-otoko* from the shrine position,"[8] but will conduct the "Opening of the Gate

[8] The following is written on the homepage of Nishinomiya Shrine (https://nishinomiya-ebisu.com/): "In response to the temporary suspension of the "Go To Travel" project throughout the country being announced by the Government on December 14, we have made the decision to cancel the certification of the fuku-otoko at the Opening of the Gate Ceremony, which has many participants from distant places as well, in the 3rd year of Reiwa."

Ceremony", which was discussed in the previous section. In other words, it may be concluded that the Shrine intended to abide by the minimum line of "continuing the tradition", and to adapt it to the social situation.

It must also be mentioned that the pilgrimage of the Tōka-Ebisu will be held. However, until now there would be many street stalls inside the shrine grounds, but they have been cancelled, and it is expected that stalls will be set up only outside the shrine. It is believed that this will lead to easing crowding to some degree. In reality, there is also each individual's practice of voluntary restraint, and it is expected that the number of pilgrims will decrease from the current 1 million. The Shrine's stance that, even considering this social situation, "the people who come in pilgrimage must not be rejected" is very interesting.

## 7. Analysis

In a time when festivals from all over the world have been cancelled or postponed because of the current coronavirus crisis, the fact that Nishinomiya Matsuri, including the *reisai*, was conducted, even if on a reduced scale, was an important decision for those involved, but I believe that it represented a great progress in terms of festivals which take the "Post-Corona, With-Corona" society into account. While it may also be said that the festival could be conducted because the spread of infections had been contained to some degree, the strong belief that it is necessary to conduct it even if braving a risk and the strong request from those involved in the festival have led to this outcome.

The festival was conducted amid not only a biological risk of infection, but also a social voluntary restraint mood. When viewing it in the context of voluntary restraint, this movement has many connections to the Tōka-Ebisu of 1989. At that time, Nishinomiya Shrine placed emphasis on the ceremony facet, by replacing, as a result, the "Lucky Men Competition" with the term "Opening of the Gate Ceremony" and, thus, made continuing the festival possible. It can be said that the Shrine succeeded in continuing Nishinomiya Matsuri this time as well by maintaining as much as possible the part of the ceremony facet, which is "worshipping" (*matsuru*), even if on a reduced scale. With the prayer for the disappearance of the plague being included in the Ebisu-mai from the *kaijō funa togyo* as well, a new message facet, that against the coronavirus, was also incorporated as a result.

Thus, emphasizing the part that festivals "worship" (*matsuru*), and are not events aimed only at attracting visitors, is possible in the case of festivals in the religious sphere. For Nishinomiya Shrine, it can be said that its having had such an experience in the past played a significant role. I believe that, when a resolution to some degree of the spread of infections has come into sight, for the festivals that have such an object of "worship" (*matsuru*), an early revival is possible, and the functions that these festivals have, to link areas and create various connections, will recover.

Unfortunately, when it comes to the Tōka-Ebisu of January 2021 at Nishinomiya Shrine, on the 16th of December, the Shrine announced that, out of the "Choosing the Lucky Men at the Opening of the Gate Ceremony", it will not hold the

"Choosing the Lucky Men" part. However, when it comes to the "Opening of the Gate Ceremony" at the "Tōka-Ebisu", for which it is determined that the act of worship is of importance, the Shrine announced its uninterrupted "continuation". Although this is a term established during the transition period from the last stage of the Shōwa Era to the Heisei Era, it can be stated that, in the current "time of emergency" as well, it has been connected to stressing the ceremony facet of festivals. When thinking of post-corona, I would like to conclude that the distinctive transformation of the festival in question at Nishinomiya Shrine created the necessary resilience (flexibility).

## 8. Acknowledgements and tasks

My research, including the present study, has been selected as part of Hyogo Prefecture's "Project of Financial Support for Studies Aimed at the Concretization of the Post-corona Society" (ポストコロナ社会の具体化に向けた調査検討費補助事業), especially established this year. I would like to take this opportunity to express my deep gratitude.

Specifically, my research "investigates the needs regarding festivals in times when there is a spread of infections, targeting those in charge of the festivals and the residents, and proposes a new form for festivals, involving sufficient measures for infection prevention". At the center of this paper is the report on the current conditions, and, based on the present discussion, I would like to contribute to the proposals for festivals under a new form.

The pressing task is the “Choosing the Lucky Men at the Opening of the Gate Ceremony at Nishinomiya Shrine’s Tōka-Ebisu”, which will be held on the 10th of December next year. Due to my research and practice of the festival so far, since 2009 I have been assuming the position of director (*riji*) of the Kaimon Shinji Kōsha. I would be pleased if the recommendations I make, precisely because I am in the position to be able to undertake research and practice at the same time, could be implemented. As previously stated, this year’s Nishinomiya Matsuri was held only with those in charge of the festival, mainly from the local neighborhood association. However, with the purpose of conducting my survey, I was especially allowed to accompany them in the festival and, thus, granted an invaluable research opportunity. For the translation of the present paper, I thank Ms. Raluca Maria Ciolca. Through this wonderful translation, it has become possible to share with the world, from the point of view of language, this example of festivals during the coronavirus crisis in Japan. I would like to express my gratitude once more.

How will people continue to associate with festivals even in the “Post-Corona, With-Corona” society? Focusing on “Nishinomiya Matsuri” and the “Choosing the Lucky Men at the Opening of the Gate Ceremony at Tōka-Ebisu”, I intend to continue my research supported by practice from now on as well, establishing them as part of my life work.

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# Made of Stone
## *Buddhist Statues of the Kansai Countryside*

*Mónika KISS*

The stone buddha[1] statues which are scattered on mountains and along roads, placed within the sacred boundaries of Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines, perfectly demonstrate how Buddhism has come to intertwine Japanese culture in the past one and a half millennia. These statues are the product of a unique combination of Japanese religious thought and practice, the implements of mountain practice, and are known by the common Japanese people who travel around the countryside or old cities, such as Kyoto. They are also the center of attention for some who enjoy mountain hikes as a hobby in recent years. With their long history, however, they are underrepresented in the fields of art historical or social studies as well. This paper aims to give insights on various problems a researcher may face upon investigating such stone works, by telling personal

[1] I am using lower-case b for buddhas and bodhisattvas when the word refers to the general category of deities, and capital B when I refer to specific buddhas and bodhisattvas (e. g. Śākyamuni Buddha, Amida Buddha, Kannon Bodhisattva, or Jizō Bodhisattva, etc.).

experiences, gained mainly in the Kansai area, and examining the literature about stone buddhas[2]. Special attention is given to the *magaibutsu* of Mt. Kasuga and how Buddhist stone statuary is viewed and considered in Japan today.

## 1. Introduction

Having lived for more than a year in Kyoto researching Japanese Buddhist art, it is only natural that the small roadside shrines (*hokora*) piqued my curiosity. Looking inside, we may not find exquisite works of art, which shows that people do not necessarily assign aesthetic values to them,

Roadside shrine (*hokora*) with Jizō stone statue in an alley near the Horikawa-Kitaōji intersection in Northern Kyoto[3]

[2] I am grateful to the Bukkyō Dendō Kyōkai, especially Chairman Kimura Kiyotaka for his continued support of my research; and the International College for Postgraduate Buddhist Studies and President Fujii Kyōko for having me as their research fellow in 2019, and their support in the past years, without which I could not have concluded the research for this paper.

[3] Unless otherwise indicated, all photos were taken by the author.

rather, their continued existence in the modern world indicates religious attachment. My interests quickly went beyond the shrines, and the Buddhist statues made of stone caught my attention. I discovered that such sculptures are dispersed over the city of Kyoto, and, furthermore, over the whole Kansai region.

Jizō Bodhisattva stone statue and stone pillars with siddham Sanskrit letters among tea-plantations, Mt. Kasuga, Nara Prefecture, 16th century

Whenever I had the chance to visit Japan, I spent several days wandering around Kyoto, Nara, or the Kansai countryside, solely hunting stone Buddhas sitting or standing on the side of the road, in the middle of tea-plantations, rice paddies, or hiding on high mountain cliffs. It was an easily feasible endeavor since the Kansai area abounds with such

images. In this study, I am using the pictures I took in the past 5 to 6 years, documenting these encounters[4].

Before examining the sculptures, I would like to share some thoughts regarding the terminology of this subject. First, we should clarify that, when we talk about *stone art* (*sekizō bijutsu*), the Japanese terminology distinguishes many categories, such as stone pillars (*sekitō*[5]), stone pillars of the five elements (*gorintō*[6]), stone buddhas (*sekibutsu*), or cliff (rock) buddhas (*magaibutsu*), etc. Shimizu (1984) proposes twenty-five different classes[7] of stone artworks (1984: 18-19).

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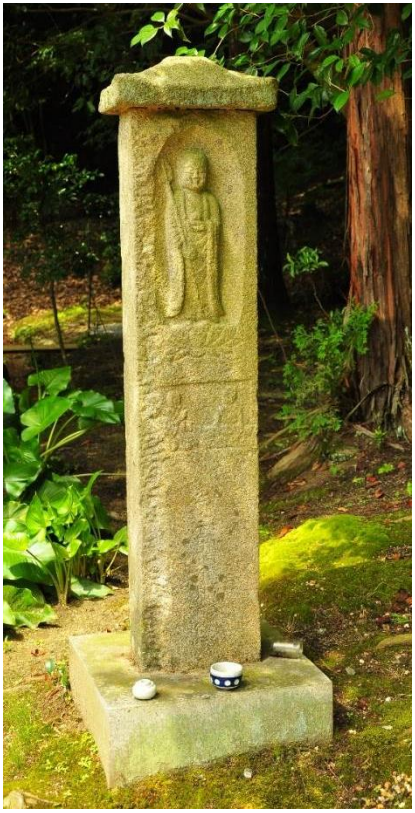
[4] I have visited most statues in and around Kyoto (Ōhara, Hieizan, Jōruriji, etc.) from 2014 to 2018. I have also scouted Asukamura, Nara, and Kasugayama, and the town of Tenri (Nara Prefecture) in the Summer of 2015. Throughout the article, I am using the photos I took during these journeys. I am grateful to the friends who have been accompanying me to these wonderful places, especially Carmen Săpunaru Tamas (University of Hyōgo) and Ueda Mitsuaki (Dōshisha University).

[5] Stone pillars or lanterns, usually placed at temples, shrines, or roadsides.

[6] Stone pillars with the symbols for the five elements (*godai*) are (from the bottom to the top): earth, water, fire, wind, and void, in the form of a pagoda (hence the *tō* character in its name which is also used for the pagoda in China and Japan). It is distinguished from the Buddhist five element (*gogyō*), which has wood and metal in it, instead of wind and void. Usually, the *siddham* Sanskrit letters of each element are carved into the stone. These were produced as memorial pillars (*kuyōtō*), a kind of tombstone (*bohyō*) from the middle of the Heian Period. Its other name is *gorin sotoba* (*sotōba*). In Japanese esoteric Buddhism, especially Shingon, the ascetic practitioners regarded their body as made of the *godai* five elements (*gorin seishin kan*; earth – knee [or legs]; water – navel; fire – chest; wind – face; and void – the crown of the head), which are almost the same as the main chakras of the body in yoga practice (there, the throat is the void and the sixth element, consciousness is the crown of the head).

[7] The classification is mainly based on the various forms of stoneware. The twenty-five classes are: 1. *sōtō*, the stupa like pagoda pillar; 2. *hōtō*, two-storied stone pillar; 3. *tahōtō*, treasure pagoda pillar; 4. *gorintō*, see above n. 4; 5. *hōkyōintō*, pillar with *siddham* Sanskrit letters and/or small sitting buddha images; 6. *hitoetō*, one-story pagoda pillar; 7. *kasatōba*, *siddham* Sanskrit letters on a (taller) pillar (*tōba*-style) with a roof; 8. *shizen sekitōba*, *tōba*-style natural rock formation (without any modeling of the stone); 9. *kakutōba*, square-based *tōba*-style pillar; 10. *itabi*, pillar monument (similar to tombstones) with *siddham* Sanskrit letters,

The last two are of special interest here, as the paper deals with Buddhist stone statues in the forms of Buddhist deities, therefore we must look at the definition of *sekibutsu* and *magaibutsu* a bit closer.



*Kasatōba* style stone pillar
with Jizō Bodhisattva, Chōgakuji,
Tenri, Nara Prefecture, 1322

without a roof; 11. *muhōtō*, round-top stone pillars, usually the tombstones of Buddhist priests; 12. *sekidō*, usually an octagon stone pillar on a hexagon stone base with a roof; 13. *sekibutsu*, see above; 14. *sekishitsu*, the "stone room" in the kofun tombs where the stone coffin is laid; 15. *ishibashi*, "stone bridge"; 16. *ishidōrō*, "stone lanterns"; 17. *ro*, "furnace"; 18. *mizubune*, stone basins; 19. *ishidorii*, stone torii gates; 20. *komainu*, the gate guardian dogs of Shinto shrines; 21. *sekihi*, stone steles usually with reliefs of buddha images and/or texts; 22. *sekibi*, "stone sun"; 23. *roban*, square stone base for pagoda pillars; 24. *daiza*, stone pedestals; 25. *sekidan*, stone platforms.

*Sekibutsu* means "stone buddhas", and the definition suggests that every statue with deity forms, made of stone, is a *sekibutsu*. *Magaibutsu*, on the other hand, is differentiated by emphasizing that they are generally carved into rocks or cliffs overhanging or overseeing fields in nature (Nihon Sekizōbutsu Jiten Henshū Iinkai 2012: 316). Now, we know that there are free-standing stone buddhas everywhere in the cities and the countryside as well, therefore, we can say that a *magaibutsu* is a *sekibutsu*, but a *sekibutsu* is not necessarily a *magaibutsu*. Shimizu (1984) does not give a separate classification of *magaibutsu* either.

## 2. Examining Japanese Stone Buddha Statues

Approaching the subject from an academic angle, first, we must consider what has been written about these sculptures so far. Academically speaking, the literature about these stone images is scarce by comparison to other fields of Japanese Buddhist art, such as the paintings or wooden statues of Buddhist deities. The subject can undeniably be approached – as studies show – from the viewpoints of religion and cultural anthropology. The art historical approach may sound obvious, since we are talking about sculptural objects, but such writings are rare in the sense of art historical analysis, and mainly limited to descriptions of conditions and preservation actions. However, in recent years, as a new trend perhaps, we notice an increase in the number of short introductory studies about specific stone monuments[8].

[8] These are mainly published in the periodical called *Nihon no sekibutsu*, see n. 10. below.

Studies of the religious aspects of these statues are more promising. It is, as I believe, an exciting topic, connected to mountain religions and to what we can call folk Buddhism (*minzoku bukkyō*) or Buddhism of the masses (*shomin bukkyō*) in Japan. Some famous and popular scholars of this field are Yamaori Tetsuo or Gorai Shigeru, both of whom had contributed to the study of stone buddhas. On the one hand, the former's monograph on Buddhist folklore (*Bukkyō minzokugaku*, 1993) touches on this topic when discussing the history of Jizō Bodhisattva becoming then popular roadside deity called O-Jizō san, as it is known among common or lay Japanese people[9]. The latter's study focuses especially on the religious aspects of stone in Japan (*Ishi no shūkyō*, 2007), discussing the stone statuary and popular beliefs of various Buddhist deities (for example, the Horseheaded [Batō] Kannon or Jizō Bodhisattvas)[10], as well as the connection of cliff reliefs (*magaibutsu*) and the mountain religion of Japan, called *shugendō*[11].

So, what about art history? Although in today's sense, art may and does include almost anything human (or not human) made, when approaching the subject of stone buddhas, we still face what can be called the problem of "applied" arts versus "high" art. Since from the beginning of Buddhism images or icons of Buddhist deities fulfill a function, representing the deity in our form realm (*rūpadhātu*), they were not regarded as artworks until the relatively recent development of the scientific field of art history at the end of the 19th century in Japan.

[9] Yamaori 1993: 110-120.
[10] Gorai 2007: 227-275.
[11] Gorai 2007: 276-285.

There are many factors for why stone buddha statues may not be regarded as artworks. First, they are generally found in natural settings, not housed in temples or museums, elevated on altars, or highlighted in display cabinets as wooden statues. Although they may be placed on temple grounds, they are clearly distinguished from the statues found in temple buildings where important religious practice (e.g., rituals) takes place.

Then, the cliff carvings of buddhas (*magaibutsu*) are exposed to harsh weather conditions and forces of nature, enduring centuries of rain, snow, lightning bolts or earthquakes that may cause serious damages to them[12]. The extent of the damage, of course, depends on the type of stone the statue was made of, or how much it is exposed to the elements (i.e., some are under small shelters or inside caves). In this aspect we should also mention the short lived, but rather severe, anti-Buddhist movement (*haibutsu kishaku*) of the first years in the Meiji Period, between 1868 and 1872, when Buddhist temples and their treasures were in danger of being destroyed, in some regions more than in others[13]. Although many stone buddha statues were damaged in these four years, there is still a huge number of statues which only show the natural decay of their stone material.

[12] One rock carving of Jizō Bodhisattva in the town of Matsuyama (Okayama Prefecture), for example, fell from its original place to the ground underneath the cliff during an earthquake in 1836 and was carried by people to its current location in 1850, so now it is found behind a garage in a suburban area. The relief is surprisingly good in condition and its inscription on the two sides of the bodhisattva is discernible even today. According to this, it was made in 1412, and is now designated as Important Cultural Property by the prefecture (1964).

[13] For more about this movement, the background, and how it ended, see Ketelaar 1993.

Moreover, apart from the damages, other factors may also impede us in their proper examination. One such factor is the natural setting, especially in the case of *magaibutsu*, which are sometimes carved into cliffs high above ground or almost unreachable places on mountains. Also, if there are no inscriptions (lost, destroyed, or never made), we may not find any information about the date they were made or the person who made them. This is actually quite common in the case of old Buddhist paintings and statues, as we only know the name of some Buddhist sculptors (*busshi*) or painters (*ebusshi*), and even these are usually found in temple records and histories, which occasionally may be questionable in their contents or origins. Records of stone or cliff buddhas are even more scarce, and finding them may require extensive scrutiny of temple records at the respective temples.

Finally, if we look up how many sculptures made of stone are designated as national treasure or important cultural property, we find an odd tendency. In the database of state designated cultural property (*kunishitei bunkazai*)[14], the majority of stone statues (*sekibutsu*) are listed under the "historic site" (*shiseki*) classification, not the "artwork" (*bijutsuhin*) category, while cliff reliefs (*magaibutsu*) are more or less listed as "artwork" (sculpture, more precisely)[15]. This shows a partial approach to the two kinds of stone images, in which the statues are less likely seen as artworks, than reliefs.

One of the longest studies of the subject, including art historical inquiries outside of Japan, is Asoke Kumar

[14] *Kunishitei bunkazaitō dētabēsu* URL: https://kunishitei.bunka.go.jp/bsys/index.
[15] There are seventeen *sekibutsu*, of which only two groups are considered artworks, while out of the eleven *magaibutsu* only four are not designated as artwork.

Bhattacharyya's *Early and Buddhist Stone Sculptures of Japan*, published in 2004 in India. The author, an Indian expert on Asian and Buddhist iconography[16], had similar impulses upon writing his book as the author of this paper when encountering the Buddhist stone statues in Japan (2004: 10)[17]. Bhattacharyya lists some of the earliest carved stone images in Japan, starting from the Nara period onward. He gives the locations and descriptions of the highlighted sculptures, complemented with short stylistic analyses. His examinations and the plenty illustrations, both of color or monochrome, make a decent basis for an art historical or historical research. Nevertheless, this book lacks the religious or sociocultural approach, and it does not clarify their origins or functions in Japanese Buddhism.

In contrast, we find many studies in Japanese; there are even periodicals for stone buddhas[18]. The problem with these, as I mentioned before, is their lack of a comprehensive viewpoint. On the one hand, there are numerous short, informative articles about them, which are somewhat superficial. On the other hand, proper scientific writings generally record hard data of the sculptures, providing information on materials, current conditions, and inscriptions,

[16] Asoke Kumar Bhattacharyya has published numerous works on the subject. See, for example, *Indian Contribution to the Development of Far Eastern Buddhist Iconography* (2001), *Buddhist Iconography in Thailand: A South East Asian Perspective* (2007), *Indian and East Asian Art and Iconography* (2007), *Historical Development of Jaina Iconography: A Comprehensive Study* (2010).

[17] "On the whole, the work produced is meant to be some sort of a conspectus of stone sculptures of Japan and not claimed to be an exhaustive treatise by any measure."

[18] *Sekibutsu* (vols. 1-7, published by the Nara Sekizō Bijutsu Kenkyūkai and the Kyōto Sōgeisha between 1963-1976); *Ishibotoke* (vols. 1-10, published by the Sado Ishibotokekai between 1968-1978); *Nihon no Sekibutsu* (171 vols. so far, published by the Nihon Sekibutsu Kyōkai since 1977).

if there are any. Normally, the Japanese books on stone buddha statues display more illustrations than written text, making them more like a picture book rather than a scholarly work.

There is, however, at least one exception: the most comprehensive study was published in 1978, as part of the prominent monography series, the *Nihon no bijutsu*. Washizuka's (1978) splendidly illustrated work investigates the beginnings of this tradition, its spread to the different regions in Japan, and the main characteristics of the various types, with plenty examples[19]. Washizuka mentions in his introductory remarks that these statues, all without exception called "O Jizō sama" by the Japanese people, were a late addition to the study of the history of Japanese sculpture, since we know almost nothing about the circumstances of how, when, why and by whom they were made (1978: 17).

The published histories of a particular town or prefecture also usually include a catalog of local artifacts, artworks, or cultural treasures. Kyoto city or Nara prefecture (including Nara city) have separate volumes dedicated to the art of stone carving (Nihon Sekizōbutsu Jiten Henshū Iinkai 2012; Shimizu 1984). These volumes present the countless sculptures by regions, districts, or the names of the Buddhist temples or Shinto shrines which house such statues. The statues are usually represented by districts, are detailed in a short article, sometimes with the addition of photos and/or drawings. And, naturally, the earliest or more important stone

[19] There are 108 illustrations of Japanese stone images on 80 pages, giving the most comprehensive picture of this tradition.

statues or monuments can be found in major encyclopedias about Japanese culture (such as the *Kokushi Daijiten*).

## 3. Stone Buddhas and Japanese Buddhism: Regional and Material Questions

The art of different cultures is not just determined by cultural differences, it is also limited by the regions' natural resources and climates. In India, the very birthplace of Buddhism, stone was a basic material when it came to making sculptures because it was available and durable - that is why we are still able to lay our eyes on such statues. Almost all extant Buddhist sculpture is made of some kind of stone, no matter the region. See, for example, the early reliefs of Sāñchī (c. 2nd-1st centuries BCE), the first anthropomorphic depictions of Śākyamuni Buddha and other Buddhist deities in Gandhara or Mathura (from the 1st century CE), or the myriads of stone statues and reliefs carved in rocks at the many cave temples of Ajanta (c. 2nd century BCE to 5th century CE)[20].

Then, when Buddhism spread to the North, Central Asia, and China, one cannot but notice the similarities between materials of Buddhist statues. The oldest Buddhist sculptures in China are all made of stone, carved into rocks and cliffs in various places, such as the Buddhist images at Kongwangshan in Jiangsu Province (c. 3rd century, the latter half of the Late

[20] Using stone as the main material was not exclusive to Buddhist images. It was employed in the case of other religious depictions, such as Hindu deities. For more about these and the referenced Buddhist art, see Rowland 1984, Huntington 1985, or Brancaccio - Behrendt 2006.

Han Period [206 BCE - 220 CE])[21]. But it seems that even in later periods, stone Buddhist images became customary in the continent, proven by the large numbers of cave temple complexes built between the Han Period and the time of the Song Dynasty (960–1279)[22].

The "Turtle Stone" (*kameishi*) in Asukamura,
Nara Prefecture, 6th century

Let us now turn to Japan and consider how materials could have possibly affected statue-making and their place or use in the Japanese Buddhist context. By looking at the Indian

[21] Interestingly, one of the oldest Buddhist temple sites is on the "Mountain Where Confucius was Gazing". For more about Kongwangshan, see Rhie 2007: 27-47.
[22] See, for example, the Binglingsi Monastery caves (from c. 420) in Gansu Province in Rhie 2010: 49-354; the Longmen Grottos (from 493) in Henan Province in McNair 2007; or the artwork of the famous Dunhuang caves in Whitfield et al. 2000.

and Chinese (or even Korean[23]) tendencies, we ought to think that monumental stone sculpture would take over the islands' landscapes. The lack of such rock cave centers or stone artworks in the first couple of centuries after the arrival of Buddhism, however, proves that local cultural bearings do matter in Japan, even though the Japanese culture is often (mistakenly) labeled as "the nation of imitators" (Lucken 2016: 1)[24].

"Two-Faced roadside protective deity" (*dōsojin*) in the background and "Monkey Stone" (*saruishi*) in the front in Asukamura, Nara Prefecture, 6th century

[23] There are some early stone sculptures and reliefs in Korea, e. g. Gayasan-i Śākyamuni cliff-rock triad [late 6th to early 7th centuries] or the monumental sitting buddha at the Golgulsa temple [6th century].

[24] For the analysis of how this image of Japan came to be, see the chapter titled "Copycat Japan" (Lucken 2016: 9-19).

The question of why Japan did not embrace the idea of monumental cliff buddha statues is not new, Washizuka brings it up as early as 1978 (p. 18). It is not that they do not have the materials, since there are plenty rocks and cliffs in Japan as well, and there are also examples of stone images made during the initial stage of the spread of Buddhist thought and material culture as well. Washizuka (p. 18) speculates that the few "distinguished people" could not bear the cost of carving cave temples or monumental images into cliffs[25].

Considering the first couple of decades or even the first century of Japanese Buddhism (from the middle of the 6th to the middle of the 7th centuries), it is also clear that these initial Japanese patrons of Buddhism had rather had the temples built in their vicinity, on their lands near their residences. The capitals of this time were mainly situated in the Yamato area (later Yamato province, mostly today's Nara Prefecture), where rock temples could not have been built easily. Furthermore, temples of capitals and cities of China and the Korean Peninsula had been built of wood primarily, and Japan adopted these styles upon encountering Buddhist institutions as a model for their own[26].

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[25] This does not mean that there are no examples for such grotto temples in Japan. For more about this, see below.

[26] The first temples founded on the Korean Peninsula were all in the capitals and cities of the three kingdoms. For more about this, see Hollenweger 1999, especially 101-217 (Goguryeo), and 265-653 (Baekje). Excavations in both Japan and the Korean Peninsula show that the first Japanese temples were modelled after Buddhist temples of the Goguryeo and Baekje kingdoms, mostly because there were active cultural and commercial ties between them. One of the foremost temple-founders was Soga no Umako (551?-626), who had direct connections with the kingdom of Baekje. The *Gangōji garan engi narabini ruki shizaichō* (747)

„Monkey Stone" (*saruishi*)
in Asukamura, Nara Prefecture,
6th century

The material, stone, has been in the center of religious worship since the very beginning of Japanese culture. The characteristics usually attached to it – strength, durability, or even indestructibility – are easily converted into religious entities [27] . Gorai Shigeru distinguishes between four categories of stone worship. I will summarize his categories here (2004: 18-23). First, people worshipped stone as it was in its natural form (*shizenseki* or *tennenseki sūhai*), a process in which they did not alter the stone surface. Then they may have started to arrange stones in circles or other forms, which they regarded as religious symbols, but still not touched the

mentions that the first temple was built with the help of craftsmen from Baekje. (*DNBZ* 85: 002a14 – 002b08.)

[27] Believing that spirits of supernatural entities can inhabit inanimate objects, or animism, has always been and still is a core aspect of Japanese folk belief. There have been many studies in this field. For a short introduction, which is concerned especially with stone, see Gorai 2004: 31-35.

stones themselves. The third category or phase of stone worship meant that people started processing (carving) stone ritualistic implements and forms. And finally, they carved letters or pictures of deities into the stone surface.

The earliest stone monuments were all excavated around the first Buddhist temples in Asukamura (Nara Prefecture), which also happen to be around the many *kofun* tombs, erected in the Asuka and Hakuhō Period. This group of stone images, probably made during the Asuka Period, is also called the "mystery stones" (*nazo no ishi*), quite correctly, since scholars could not decipher their origins or functions because of the many forms they display: there are human-like figures in strange and sometimes unnatural poses (we can recognize hugging male-female couples, but the strangest statues are the two-faced figures, looking in opposite directions[28]); there are also various kinds of animals (turtle or monkey); or there is the *sakafuneishi* stone monument, the literal translation of its name being "alcohol-boat stone"[29]. Bhattacharyya (2004: 13-14) suspects that they are – or linked to the custom of – roadside protective deities (*dōsojin* or *sae no kami*).[30]

[28] This posture may be recognized in Roman mythology as well, since Janus, the Roman god of doorways, was also portrayed with two heads looking in opposite directions. Similarly, Janus too has obscure origins, but there have been attempts of finding its roots in Eastern cultures since very early on (see for example Ackerman 1938 or Taylor 2000). It is interesting, however, that both these two-faced "mystery stones" and the depictions of Janus are connected to boundaries and transitions (doors/gateways). It may be assessed that either they share the same origins, which, in the case of Japan, may be another proof of early connections with the continent, or they show the same universal human experiences and needs manifested in their respective belief systems.

[29] About the *sakafuneishi* and its excavation, see Aihara 2004.

[30] One of the most familiar religious folk traditions is putting stones of protective

The official account of how and when Buddhism arrived in Japan is recorded in the *Nihon shoki* (720), the second oldest chronicle of Japan. It says that King Sŏngmyŏng (523-554), the ruler of Baekje at that time, sent a gilded bronze statue of Śākyamuni Buddha along with other Buddhist treasures and texts (*Nihon shoki* vol. 19: 1132, paragraph 1). The majority of the Buddhist images from the beginning of the spread of Buddhism in Japan, the Asuka and Hakuhō Periods (6th century to 710), are made of bronze, with a few exceptions of wood[31]. Furthermore, monumentality is also not going to be commonplace in Japan until later in the Nara Period (710-794).[32] All but some exceptions of Asuka and Hakuhō Buddhist sculptural images are relatively small-scale, gilt bronze statues.[33] This can probably be ascribed to the

deities near crossroads and on the borders of settlements (*dōsojin*). Probably predating Buddhism and regarded as some kind of local or native Japanese belief, it is mostly regarded as a Shinto tradition. The other name of these deities is *sae* (or *sai*) *no kami* ("road-blocking deities"), which indicates that they are shutting out or obstructing (*fusagu*) evil spirits and entities from the outside world from getting into the area they are guarding, and such deities appear in the *Nihon shoki* as *funado/funato* (*chimata*) *kami* (Yamaori 1993: 118-119). They were also called *tamuke no kami* during the Nara and Heian Periods, as protectors of travelers (Hirakawa 2006: 317). Dōsojin festivals (*dōsojin matsuri*) are held throughout Japan, which shows that these deities are massively popular even today. For more about these deities, their origins, and belief, see, for example, Kuraishi 2003, Hirakawa 2006, or Kinoshita 2021a and 2021b (all in Japanese).

[31] For example, the statue called the Kudara Kannon is made of wood.

[32] The first Japanese "colossal buddha statues" (*daibutsu*, e. g. the Asuka or Nara *daibutsu*), as Dorothy Wong calls them, were also made of bronze, unlike in China or Korea. For more about these, see Wong 2019.

[33] For more about this, see Matsuura 2004. Donald F. McCallum, however, emphasized that the Buddhist art of the Asuka and Hakuhō Periods are far from uniform and suggested that Hakuhō images should be examined separately from the Asuka Period ones, see McCallum 2012. Recent Japanese scholarship seems to agree, seeing that one great exhibition was held in 2015 in the Nara National Museum, and it focused only on Hakuhō art.

circumstances in which Buddhism spread during the 6th and 7th centuries[34].

The *Nihon shoki* also mentions the first stone buddha image to be brought to Japan from Baekje, which was supposed to be the first principal image (*honzon*) of the first Buddhist temple erected by Soga no Umako, one of the first influential supporters of Buddhism in Japan[35]. The text says,

> "Autumn, 9th month (13th year of Emperor Bidatsu's reign [584]). Kafuka [Kabuka] no Omi [the personal name is omitted], who came from Baekje, had a Maitreya [Miroku] stone statue (…). He [Soga no Umako] administered a Buddhist temple on the east side of his dwelling, in which he enshrined the stone image of Maitreya."
>
> (*Nihon shoki* vol. 20: 1213, paragraph 2) [36]

The first turbulent decades after King Sŏngmyŏng's buddha statue - according to the *Nihon shoki* story - was destroyed, it was the ruling elite who became the first patrons of Buddhism, and they built the first temples on their estates. Aristocratic and royal patrons were influenced by the continental cultural trends, therefore it is understandable that they followed in their shoes and had many easily portable gilt bronze Buddhist statues made[37] (McCallum 2012:

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[34] For more about the artistic examinations of styles and influences between early Chinese, Korean, and Japanese sculpture, see Tanabe 2003.

[35] For more about these first two Buddhist images in Japan, see Li 1993.

[36] Translated by the author from Japanese with the help of William G. Aston's English translation (1896). Bhattacharyya (2004) gives the year 454 as the date of these events. However, the correct date is 584 (Bhattacharyya 2004: 19).

[37] McCallum highlights this trend in China and Korea in the 6th and 7th centuries, when - compared to earlier times - the cultural exchange was at its height.

4). This was, however, a selective process if we consider that the votive stele did not become as popular and widespread as in China or even Korea. These stone mementos were produced since the 1st century in China, although the Buddhist steles were only made over a brief period compared to other carved stone tablets[38] (Wong 2004: 1). The ones with Buddhist inscriptions and symbols were commonly produced to ensure benefits to the family and estate of the donors[39].

Even in the Nara Period, we see that only a handful of stone monuments survive. This time, it was the newly introduced, however short-lived continental sculpting techniques - such as the hollow dry lacquer (*dakkatsu kanshitsu*) or the wood-core dry lacquer (*mokushin kanshitsu*) - which outweighed stone-carving. We see in the centuries following the Asuka, Hakuhō, and Nara Periods that, although Buddhist stone statue production increased significantly, it was mainly limited to *shugendō* practitioners on mountains or pilgrimage routes, after religious pilgrimages became more and more popular with the nobles and later the common people.

Now let us see some representative examples of the early stone buddha statues in Japan. Not surprisingly, most of the earliest examples of stone buddha deities are found in the Kansai area, mainly in Nara Prefecture, because most early Buddhist temples were built on or near the estates of high-ranking people of the court, and the court was moving around in the area now called Nara Prefecture. Although the earliest

[38] For the distribution of these steles, see Wong 2004: 3. For the Korean steles, see Kim 2020: 66-68.

[39] See, for example, the votive text on a smaller Buddhist stele in the National Museum of Stockholm in Sirén 1959: 9-10.

stone buddha statue is said to have been brought to Japan in 584, it only survives in the sources. The oldest surviving Buddhist stone image is the Śākyamuni triad at the Ishiidera temple, which is dated to the first half of the 8th century. This stone bas-relief shows Śākyamuni Buddha in the middle, both of his legs shown in front of the pedestal, touching the earth (*zenkafuza*), his attendant bodhisattvas (*wakiji*) standing with their hands pressed together (*gasshō*). This is a common feature with some of the bronze or clay Hakuhō triads of the previous century[40]. The meditation hand gesture of the buddha of this stone triad shows closer iconographical connection to those of the images found on unglazed clay tiles (*senbutsu*) excavated mainly in the Asukamura area[41] than the bronze triads. Although Bhattacharyya suspects this stone triad was carved in the early 8th century, the depiction is not common in the Nara Period and indicates an older date, maybe the end of the 7th century[42] (Bhattacharyya 2004: 19).

[40] Bronze triad for example the Amitābha triad in the Tokyo National Museum today (previously maybe belonged to the Yamadadera temple of the Asukamura area). Very similar to this buddha is the bronze Śākyamuni statue of the Jindaiji temple.

[41] See, for example, the rectangle shaped *senbutsu* triad, unearthed at the Minami Hokkeji (Tsubosakadera) temple. Nara Kokuritsu Bunkazai Kenkyūjo Asuka Shiryōkan 2015: 9; 36. For more about the *senbutsu* see, for example, Kuno 1976.

[42] Shimizu (1984) also mentions that stylistically the triad is closer to the Hakuhō Period, which he calls the first half of the Nara Period (Shimizu 1984: 5). Bhattacharyya thinks that a stylistic analogue can be found at the Nālanda temple site III in India because of the flanking bodhisattvas' hips and how their robes were painted red, which is "a practice known in rare older images in India" (Bhattacharyya 2004: 20). Japan and Japanese monks, however, never had direct contact with India and Indian Buddhist culture, only with some Indian monks in Chinese land, in the context of Chinese culture, therefore this possible link of the red robes could only have happened through Chinese intermediary images.

Śākyamuni Buddha stone triad, Ishiidera,
Nara, first half of the 8th century
(Photo by Carmen Săpunaru Tămaş)

Other early (possibly late Hakuhō or very early Nara Period) examples are the *magaibutsu* group of deities at the Takidera temple (Nara city, Yatachō; some are bas-reliefs, some are lightly etched into the rock) or the Yakushi *magaibutsu* at Iburi, near Uda (Nara Prefecture; badly damaged)[43].

## 4. The Material Culture of Mountain Worship and *Magaibutsu* on Mt. Kasuga

No wonder Japan became a country of sacred mountains, since 73% of its land is mountainous. There are Buddhist holy mountains, there are sacred mountains which are regarded as

[43] For more about the history of stone buddhas in Japan, see Shimizu 1984: 2-18.

living spirits (*kami*), and then there is Mount Fuji, an active volcano, and a common symbol of Japan (and a *kami*). Furthermore, mountains were also considered to be the border between the world of the living and that of the dead: certain phrases from the Nara period involving mountains[44] were directly linked with death (Vörös 2012: 172).

The Hakuhō and Nara Periods are of utmost importance in the development of the Japanese mountain worship and the ascetic practitioners' movement (*shugendō*). Although some encyclopedias still call it a branch of Japanese Buddhism, scholars generally agree that it is a highly syncretic set of practices, which combines elements from Buddhist, especially esoteric schools, the cult of the *kami*[45], and native beliefs about mountain worship. Miyake (2009) remarks that religious traditions such as Buddhism and Daoism religions "brought with them rites and rituals for acquiring magico-religious powers through ascetic practices." (Miyake 2009: 74) The practitioners, called *shugenja* or *yamabushi* in Japanese, therefore were mostly wandering monks who were known to practice magic and help common people with healing or other rites in their everyday life. *Shugendō* should not be regarded as a religious institution, but rather as a set of (folk) religious

[44] The elegy songs of the dead (*banka*) in the *Man'yōshū waka* collection (late 7th century) show that, for example, the phrase *yama yuki* ("going to the mountains") means to die (Vörös 2012: 173). For more about this, see Hori 1968: 141-180.

[45] *Kami* here refers to the objects (deities or spirits) of worship in Shinto, generally translated to English as deities, gods, or (divine) spirits. The term may include actual gods, who are named in Japanese mythology (i. e. in the *Kojiki* és *Nihon shoki*), ancestors, or spirits of the whole universe, animate and inanimate things included. In Japan, *kami* is generally distinguished from Buddhist deities, as the local or native supernatural beings, opposite of the buddhas, which – in certain times, and by certain people – were labelled as foreign deities.

traditions, which were born out of the needs and hopes of the people, answered by these practitioners (Miyake 2009: 74).

With the appearance of the *dogū* clay figurines in the Middle Jōmon Period (c. 3500-2500 BCE) without any kind of function in sustenance in the everyday life, we can assume that there had been a nature-belief system in ancient Japan. Then, we notice that the *kofun* tombs imitate mountains. Also, by the 6th century there were already mountains which were venerated as sacred sites (Miyake 2009: 75). Based on these we see the pattern of nature or rather mountain worship in pre-Buddhist Japan[46]. Mountains and mountain worship are also part of Buddhism, with its very core, the cosmological center, being a mountain (Mt. Meru).

*Shugendō*, as a movement shall we say, however, appeared according to legend after the arrival of Buddhism. It is said to have started with the legendary founder of these practices, En no Gyōja (also known as En no Ozunu/Ozuno/ Otsuno, 634 - c. 700/707). He already lived in the time of the rapid spread of Buddhism and, with other Buddhist monks, practiced on Mt. Katsuragi (Nara Prefecture). Tendai and Shingon, the two new schools of Buddhism introduced in the beginning of the 9th century, further advanced Japanese mountain worship quite significantly by building their new temple complexes on mountaintops, Mt. Hiei and Mt. Kōya respectively. The reason for this was their new kind of

[46] Hori Ichirō distinguishes three categories of mountain worship in Japan: the first centring around volcanos, such as Mt. Fuji; the second focusing on mountains as the sources of water (streams); and the third being concerned with the mountains and the soul of the dead, and how they are linked, even before Buddhism through the *kofun* burial mounds (Hori 1968: 149-151).

Buddhist practice curriculum, which included meditation and visualization techniques, thus the need for secluded places arose[47]. With the appearance of these new sects and their new esoteric Buddhist teachings, which affected not just what we can call *Shinto* today, but *shugendō* as well, we see that all the religious entities of the time were influencing each other[48].

What is important for us from the perspective of the stone buddha statues is that the ascetic practitioners (monks) were required to do their practice in the mountain. From very early on, however, they needed permission from the proper authorities to live and practice on mountains[49]. The *magaibutsu* and *sekibutsu* statues surviving on these mountains are the result of the mountain practice sites and the monks' need for visual aids for their meditation.

The necessities of mountain practitioners also called forth the making of temple-like grottoes. The rare examples of Japanese Buddhist grottoes do not come even near in number

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[47] The Enryakuji temple complex, center of the Tendai denomination, is erected on Mt. Hiei, a mountain to the North-East of Kyoto, while the Kongōbuji temple complex, center of the Shingon denomination, is built on Mt. Kōya, a mountain in Wakayama Prefecture, south of Kyoto.

[48] The Tendai and Shingon sect also developed through the influence of other religious traditions in Japan. It was perhaps due to the influence of *shugendō* that both sects have mountain ascetic practices, which date back to the Heian Period according to their written sources. In the Tendai, such practice is the *sennichi kaihōgyō* ("thousand-day circumambulation of the mountain peak"), which is one of the cruelest ascetic practices (for more about this, see, for example, Stevens 1988); or in the Shingon the *kanchū mizugyō* ("practice in the cold water") every year on January 24th.

[49] The *Sōniryō* ("Regulations for Monks and Nuns") of the Yōrō Code of 701 states in the 13th rule that monks need to ask for permission from their temple and other central authorities (such as the Sōgō or Central Monastic Office) if they wish to go to the mountains to meditate and practice. See the English translation of the Regulations by Joan Piggott at the Ritsuryō Translation Project website (URL: http://www. uscppjs.org/ritsury-translation-project).

or quality to Chinese Buddhist cave temple complexes, but they attest that this tradition did appear in Japan. The earliest examples are from the pre-Nara periods (maybe as early as late Asuka, or more probably Hakuhō), and both found on Mt. Nijō in Nara Prefecture[50]. From these and other examples in the Kansai region, and even more on the island of Kyūshū, where *magaibutsu* and smaller caves with stone buddhas are found in bigger numbers, we see clearly that such places were created by and for the mountain practitioners, are usually of a smaller size, and the images carved in the walls are either sunk reliefs (*shizumibori*), sometimes barely scratched and now almost undiscernible, or mid- (*han'ukibori* or *chūnikubori*) maybe bas-reliefs (*asaukibori* or *usunikubori/usu'ukibori*). Next, let me introduce a group of *magaibutsu* on Mt. Kasuga, which may have been made in different periods, but there may be an underlying pattern of thought linking them together.

One of the most interesting group of images, directly related to mountain practitioners, are the eighteen relief Buddhist deities from the Heian Period (794-1185/1192) on Mt. Kasuga. They are called Mt. Kasuga rock cave stone buddhas (*Kasugayama sekkutsu butsu*)[51]. Although they are inked to the Nara Period[52], an inscription, divided into parts and carved next to various buddha images, says that they

[50] One is at the ruins of Rokutanji (Rokuyaji) temple, the other is at the Iwaya ("cavern") mountain pass (Iwaya tōge). For more about these, see Gorai 2007: 276-277.
[51] Not to be confused with the Jigokudani cave stone buddhas (*Jigokudani sekkutsu butsu*), which are close and has stone buddha images, however, those are only scratched into the surface (it is more like a linear drawing or close to sunk reliefs) and with their colorful paintings they are closer to what we could call a fresco than a relief.
[52] The stone from this cave was used at the casting of the Great Buddha statue of the Tōdaiji temple in Nara.

were sculpted between 1155 and 1157, probably by a mountain ascetic called Imanyobō Gan'i, who lived and practiced in the cave at that time[53] (Shimizu 1984: 283). We see standing and sitting buddhas, bodhisattvas, and other Buddhist deities carved on the walls of the two joined Eastern and Western grottoes. In the former (Eastern) grotto there is a 2-meter-high pagoda-like stone pillar, and on each side four buddhas (Yakushi, Shaka, Amida, and maybe Miroku) are placed according to their respective directions (e.g., Amida is carved on its West side), and although Shimizu (1984) indicates that the buddhas carved here are the four buddhas of the exoteric (not esoteric) traditions (*kengyō*), we are left without any explanation for this conclusion (Shimizu 1984: 281-282). The problem here is that some buddhas are easily identified – see, for example, Yakushi the Medicine Buddha, who is commonly depicted with his medicine pot (*yakko*), but others may have the same iconographies, without any distinguished symbols or hand gestures (*mudrā* in Sanskrit or *inzō* in Japanese). Shaka, Miroku, Hōshō (Ratnasambhava) or Ashuku (Akṣobhya) buddhas are among the latter group, who can be difficult to tell apart.

[53] The first part of the inscription was found next to the head halo of Amida Buddha. It says: 「開眼畢　保元二年大歳(蔵?)丁丑二月廿七日仏造始四月廿一日」. The next part is between two buddha reliefs, Dainichi (Mahāvairocana) and Fukūjōjū (Amoghasiddhi) Buddha: 「廿日始之作者今如房願意」. According to a record in the Kōfukuji temple (dated to 1845), the missing part of the inscription said: 「久寿二年」 (1155).

Four standing Jizō Bodhisattva carved into the wall of a cave,
Mt. Kasuga, Nara Prefecture, 1155-1157

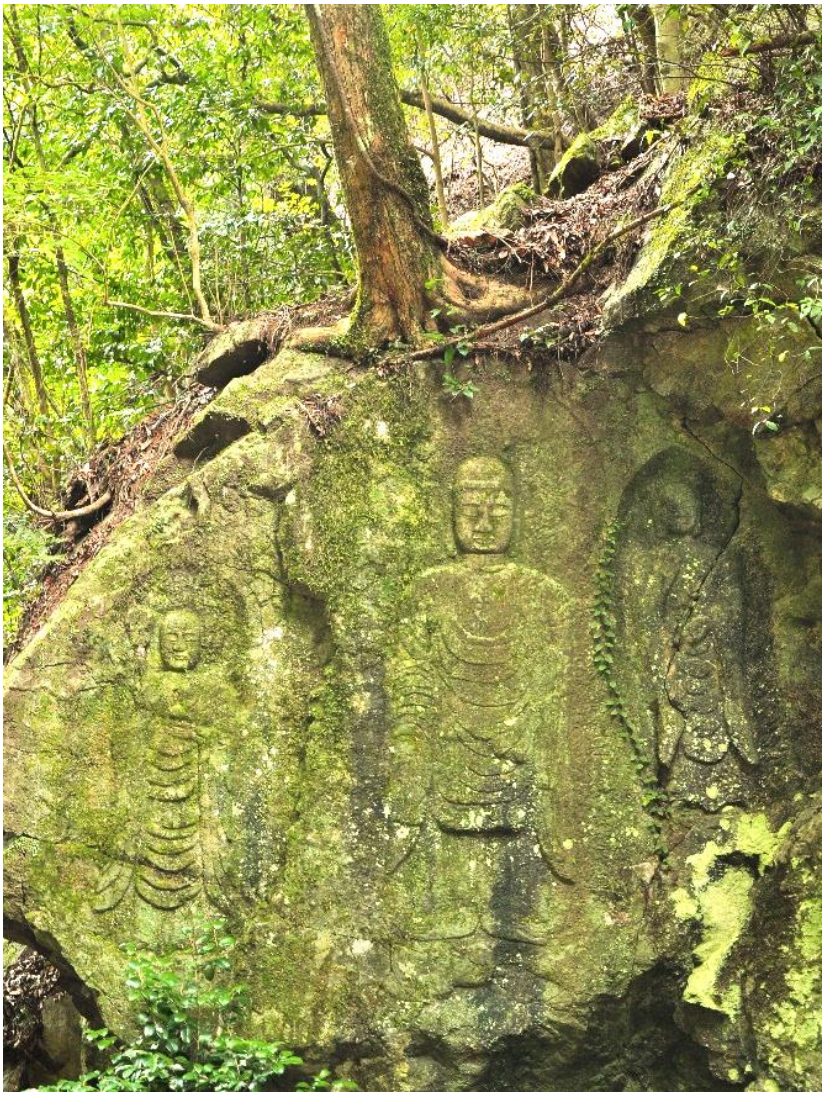
The same problem was present in the case of the Hōryūji temple Kondō murals (7th century). After failed attempts at identifying and linking the buddha murals to the early Buddhist scriptures, which were popular in the imperial court during the 7th century, namely the *Golden Light Sutra* (*Suvarṇaprabhāsa Sūtra*; *Konkōmyō kyō*), however, as Dorothy Wong highlights, early scholarship on this subject identified the same four buddhas also appearing grouped together in the pagodas of more than one of the early Buddhist temples, such as the Kōfukuji (Nara), Gangōji (Nara), and Shitennōji (Ōsaka) temples (Wong 2008: 154-155). First, they were thought to be an iconographical grouping unique to the Hossō (Faxiang) school (Fukui Rikichirō 1917), but later they became seen as the buddhas of the four directions (*shibutsu* or *shihō shibutsu*), a group of deities which cannot

be linked to any Buddhist sects, a group which was mainly depicted in China on the four walls of stone or built, wooden pagodas (Naitō Toichirō 1943).[54] (Wong 2008: 155)

This identification proves that the four buddhas on the stone pagoda inside the Eastern cave on Mt. Kasuga are Yakushi, Shaka, Amida, and Miroku, and probably further demonstrates the ties between the Kōfukuji temple and ascetic practitioners on Mt. Kasuga, hence *shugendō*. Therefore, it is more than possible that the ascetic monk Gan'I, who carved the deities, came from the Kōfukuji temple, whose monks were already connected to one of the major *shugendō* centres of the time, Mt. Kinpu.

The cave is closed to the public, entry is prohibited by a metal fence, but it can be discerned from what we can see from the outside that the reliefs are low, and all must have been painted, as pigment is preserved on the garments of the buddhas and bodhisattvas. Some reliefs are heavily damaged, some are preserved in relatively good conditions, therefore stylistic examination is also possible. The carvings show skills, with proper proportions of the standing and sitting figures and serene facial expressions, which all point to the fact that Gan'i knew and adapted the so-called Fujiwara style (Shimizu 1984: 282-283), or in other names "Japanese style" (*wayō*), which is the most important development of Buddhist sculpture in the Heian Period.[55]

[54] The "buddhas of the four directions" designation can be misleading. Usually this group consists of Ashuku, Hōshō, Amida, and Mimyōshō (Varasvara?) Buddha.
[55] For more about this style of Buddhist sculpture, see, for example, Nedachi 2007.



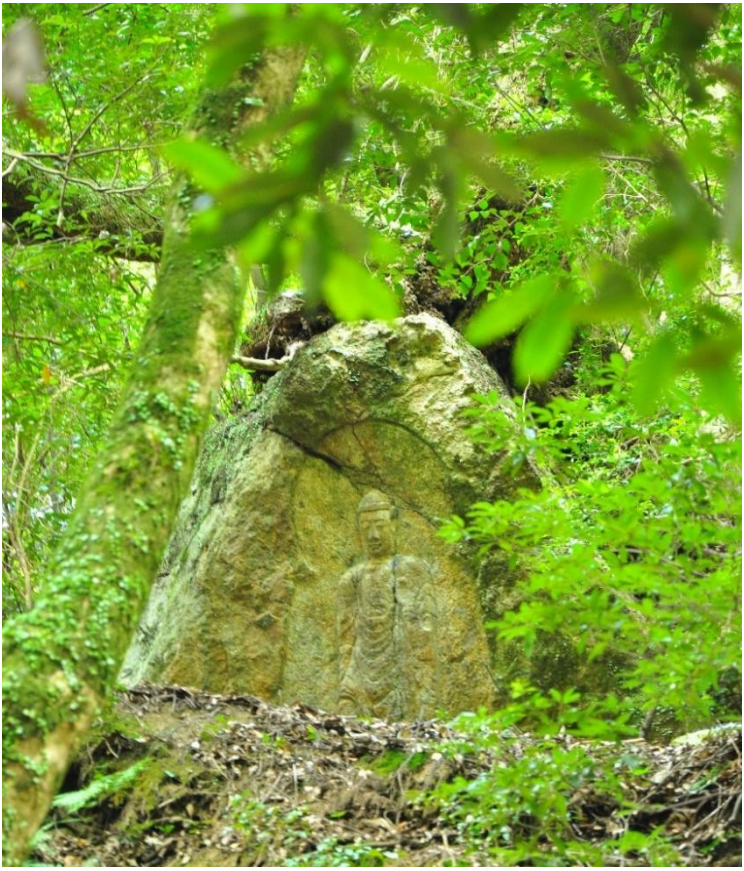
Miroku Buddha and two Jizō Bodhisattvas, Mt. Kasuga,
Nara Prefecture, late 14th century

Mt. Kasuga, the mountain behind Kasuga Taisha in Nara, has other fascinating old stone buddha statues. There are three I should mention here, because just as the Kasuga cave deities, these also show the involvement of mountain ascetic practitioners. What all of them have in common is that they are also *magaibutsu* and most of them are carved into cliffs which are difficult to approach even today. There is a trail called *Takisaka no michi* on which we see a Miroku Buddha with two Jizō Bodhisattvas.

Miroku is a very low relief, with the drapes barely scratched into the surface, while the two Jizōs flanking the buddha are closer to being sunk reliefs. They show two styles, and it is not unlikely that the middle deity and the flanking bodhisattvas were carved by different monks, although Shimizu assesses that the left side Jizō may be the work of the same person who carved Miroku Buddha (Shimizu 1984: 278). The difference in the height of the deity and the depth of the drapes' crinkles suggest otherwise, although it is true that the right side Jizō differs from both other two deities in this group.

Miroku has a special connection to mountains and one mountain above all, Mt. Kinpu. In Japan, Buddhist and *shugendō* practitioners thought that the future buddha, Miroku, would enter the world by descending to this mountain. Legend has it that En no Gyōja, the (legendary) founder of *shugendō* also visited this mountain where all in all four deities appeared to him: first it was Shaka, the Historical buddha; then Kannon, the compassionate bodhisattva; and Miroku, the future buddha. The fourth was Zaō Gongen, a central deity in the syncretic *shugendō* mountain practices and the protector of Mt. Kinpu.

This mountain also enjoyed royal and noble patronage in the Heian Period, and we have records that members of the elite class often made pilgrimages to it from as early as the beginning of the 11th century[56] (Tyler 1990: 172).



„Kannon of the Setting Sun" (*Yūhi Kannon*) on Mt. Kasuga, Nara Prefecture, c. late 13th century

[56] For more about the role of Mt. Kinpu and its social and religious aspects, see Tyler 1990: 172-177.

Then, there is the rock buddha called “Kannon of the Setting Sun” (*Yūhi Kannon*), which may be a Miroku buddha, because its characteristics are closer to those of a buddha (*nyorai*). Also, there are three plus one images of Jizō Bodhisattva. Most of these reliefs are low, but we see at one of the Jizō Bodhisattvas (Takisaka Jizō), that it is a sunk relief, which is a rare but existing artistic tradition in the case of Japanese stone buddhas.[57] Stylistically, these reliefs are very different, the former group being much closer to the Miroku Buddha depicted with other two Jizō Bodhisattvas (see above).

Takisaka Jizō, Mt. Kasuga, Nara Prefecture, c. late 13th – early 14th centuries

[57] One other representative example of such a sunk relief is the Miroku buddha at the Chōgakuji temple in Tenri, Nara Prefecture, made in the Kamakura Period.

Jizō Bodhisattva is, without a doubt, one of the most popular and easily the most famous bodhisattva in Japan. It is the bodhisattva with the most *Japanized* forms,[58] and its name coalesced with stone buddhas everywhere in Japan: there is probably no village, city, or countryside without the image of Jizō, and its respectful Japanese name "Ojizōsama" is used by Japanese people to refer to all stone buddhas, no matter the deity.

Almost all Buddhist temples enshrine at least one Jizō stone statue "as an auxiliary deity" (Horton 2007: 113), whether it has any connection to the temple or not, because this is a bodhisattva of the people, and "many Japanese believe Jizō will save them at any moment, in any situation, without any conditions or stipulations beyond simple faith." (Schumacher 2014: 153) The bodhisattva became especially widespread with the arrival of esoteric Buddhism, the development of the *honji suijaku* thought[59] during the Heian

[58] Jizō's name became associated with various kinds of aspects and conditions during the past thousand years, resulting in around eighty (!) different emanations, most of which are indigenous to Japan. Some of the most common and widespread forms of this bodhisattva are the Mizuko Jizō ("Water-Child Jizō, the after-life guardian of stillborn or unborn [also aborted] children), the Enmei Jizō ("Life-prolonging Jizō"), and the Six Jizō formation, which are grouped together to show that Jizō bodhisattva is always there for all the beings in the six realms (*rokudō*). For the list of 78 forms of Jizō, see the *Gods of Japan - A-to-Z Photo Dictionary of Japanese Religious Sculpture & Art.*
(URL: https://www.onmarkproductions.com/html/jizo1.shtml#forms)

[59] Literally meaning "original land and temporary manifestation", this doctrine was the culmination of the amalgamation of the *kami* and the buddhas (*shinbutsu shūgō*). According to this, buddhas are the original deities of whom the *kami* are mere manifestations in Japan, and the latter were sent to Japan by the former before the arrival of the Buddha's teachings to help the Japanese people accept these upon their arrival. The beginning of such a syncretic theory was in the Nara Period when the *kami* started to be looked at as suffering beings who needed rescue by the buddhas and bodhisattvas. For more about this and the development of *honji suijaku* faith, see Tyler 1989, Teeuwen – Rambelli 2002: 1-53.

Period, and becoming a deity of Japanese folk religion (*minzoku shūkyō*)[60] in the Kamakura Period when the *mappō* doctrine,[61] even though the earliest mentions of the Buddhist scriptures in which Jizō appears are already recorded in the middle of the 8th century. According to Lakić Parać (2016), Jizō's popularity can be the result of its association with "procreation and protection of progeny" as "the most powerful and meaningful items of human existence" (Lakić Parać 2016: 116). Its popularity was even further aided by the new ruling class of warriors from the Kamakura Period (Dykstra 1978: 188).

Three Jizō Bodhisattvas, Mt. Kasuga, Nara Prefecture, middle of the 14th century

[60] Along with Kannon and Fudō Myōō, Jizō, especially as a stone statue, often appears in Japanese folk tales as well. One representative example is the tale called *Aruki Jizōsama* ("The Walking Jizō"), a folk tale from Aomori Prefecture. In this tale the protagonist, an old lady, thinks that the Jizō stone statue near her home came to life and visited her as a wandering monk (Maeda and Yamane 1997: 4-6).

[61] The last of the three ages of the Buddha's dharma (*sanji*), the "latter day of the dharma" is the period when Shaka's teachings decline and there are no people who understand them completely anymore. This is the time when rebirth in Amida's Pure Land (*ōjō*) as an "easy practice" (*igyō*) to Buddhist salvation spread throughout Japan with the teachings of Hōnen, Shinran, and their disciples among the common people.

Jizō is also connected to the Kasuga Taisha and Mt. Kasuga, as the *honji* form of the Kasuga San no Miya deity. Apart from textual evidence, visual material is also available as proof, such as the many variations of the Kasuga mandalas dating back as early as the 13th century.[62] There are two special depictions of the bodhisattva associated with Kasuga Taisha in the collection of the Nara National Museum. One of them is a rare silk painting depiction of a thousand Jizōs, which is also a picture of the six realms (*rokudō e*[63]), with Mt. Mikasa and Mt. Kasuga in the upper left part,[64] It is believed that under these mountains there is the realm of hell (*jigoku*) and that is how Jizō and the six realms are connected to the Kasuga cult. The two mountains also connect Kōfukuji temple and Kasuga Taisha, both being built at the foot of Mt. Mikasa, with Mt. Kasuga behind it becoming the sacred mountain of Kasuga Taisha. This is again a visual evidence that this temple and shrine was a strong example of *honji-suijaku* faith, fully developed by the 12th century (Tyler 1990: 157).

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[62] See, for example, the *Kasuga shaji mandara* („Mandala image of the shrines and temples of Kasuga", URL: https://www.narahaku.go.jp/collection/1031-0.html) in the Nara National Museum.

[63] Pictures of the paths of transmigration (or states of existence), namely that of hell, hungry ghosts, animals, *ashura*s (Asura), humans, and gods. Jizō is connected to these paths by his vow to assist all beings who need his help in all the paths. He makes his vows in the *Dizang pusa benyuan jing* (*Sutra of the Past Vows of the Earth Store Bodhisattva*, translated into Chinese by Śikṣānanda in the 7th – 8th centuries): "*From now until the end of the time to come, through countless kalpas, using expansive expedient devices I will bring liberation to beings in the six paths who are suffering for their sins.*" (*Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō* vol. 13: 778b14 – 16) The set of six Jizō is usually displayed in the entranceways of cemeteries in Japan, showing his connection to the dead and the afterlife.

[64] *Kasuga sentai Jizō zu*, 13th century. URL: https://www.narahaku.go.jp/collection/1254-0.html.

The other Jizō painting shows the bodhisattva alone on a cloud in descent.[65] The background shows Mt. Kasuga and its surroundings and the bodhisattva gives off rays of light. The landscape setting, the descending form of the bodhisattva, and the lights emanating from its body instantly remind us of the pictures of Amida's descent to welcome the souls of the dead, who can enter the Western Paradise (*raigōzu*). Amida and Jizō were linked through their connection to death, and the bodhisattva even delivered beings from Hell to Amida's Western Paradise, explaining the iconographical unity on this painting (Yiengpruksawan 1998: 138).

We cannot but notice that, altogether, there are six *magaibutsu* depictions of Jizō in three parts (three Jizō groups, two Jizōs with Miroku Buddha, and a single Jizō relief) on the *Takisaka no michi* trail, although made in different periods and by different hands. It was perhaps a continuous effort by Buddhist monks, carried on throughout centuries until the set of six Jizōs was complete.[66]

## 5. The Allure of Stone Buddhas Today

John K. Nelson lists three forms of motivation of why people go to temples and shrines today (Nelson 2000: 22). First, there is the obvious, personal faith, however fading there are still many people around the world with genuine need for religious experiences. In Japan, we see that the notion of faith or religion differs from Western thought and

[65] *Kasuga Jizō mandara,* 14th century. URL: https://www.narahaku.go.jp/collection/1442-0.html.

[66] There are also other single standing stone buddhas, however, not *magaibutsu* and made in later periods.

experiences, therefore practices like buying talismans for good luck (*omamori*) or fortune-telling paper (*omikuji*) can be viewed as religious acts. Although we are inclined to think of religious acts as out of the ordinary, something not part of the mundane, our everyday life, the Japanese people integrated Buddhism and Shinto into their culture to a point where it is simply hard to separate the "sacred" (or religious) from the "profane" (or ordinary). This manifests in small gestures, for example, when in Japan someone stops by a temple or shrine on their way to work to quickly talk to the buddhas or *kami* to wish for a good meeting presentation.

The other two reasons for visiting places that are considered sacred are much more interesting in our investigation of stone buddhas, since they can be fused in the allure of historical places and "important cultural treasures" (Nelson 2000: 22). The same way people are attracted to old castles or historical sights everywhere, Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines are some of the last places – or rather evidence – of traditional Japanese art and crafts in the speedily modernizing country. These treasure houses of Japanese culture are connected to the past in many ways: their site, buildings, or material culture may date back to ancient times (Nara or Heian periods). Stone Buddhist statues, as we saw, started appearing almost as soon as Buddhism arrived in Japan, and nowadays they are everywhere, and can be found even in the biggest cities. Keeping and integrating them into the cityscapes shows that they are part of the collective Japanese thought and culture.

Sugiyama Jizō triad, Nakano Sugiyama park,
Nakano-ku, Tokyo

Religion and religious behavior were also altered and promoted at the same time by modern phenomena such as tourism. Especially Buddhist pilgrimages (*junrei* or *meguri*) have been growing in popularity in the past decades. People have different motives for embarking on a religious pilgrimage, and emphasis can be placed on the attraction of sites. Since the Japanese state is firmly separated from religious organizations following the 1947 constitution,[67] it is no surprise that Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines have to rely on revenues

[67] This was the first time that actual religious freedom was acknowledged in Japan. (For more about the religious freedom and the separation of church and state in Japan, see O'Brien – Ohkoshi 1996.) The first constitution of Japan, called the Meiji Constitution of 1889, did include an article on religious freedom (Article 28), but it limited this freedom so that it did not hinder Japanese people from fulfilling their duties towards the emperor and the state. This practically meant that they were expected to participate in the state Shinto practices which were introduced to the everyday life of the country such as shrine rites which became obligatory and was not considered "religious observance" (Hardacre 1989: 39).

from entrance tickets (only temples) or merchandise, sold on site, apart from the religious services to their parishioners. Such pilgrimages also involve stone buddha statues in numerous ways: they can be found alongside the routes, in temple precincts, and recently we see that people started stone buddha routes, sometimes called pilgrimages. Stone statues on roadsides have the same protecting function as the *dōsojin* and we know from countless tales how these roadside deities might *come to life*[68] (in a dream) and help a traveler in trouble.[69]

Japanese Buddhist pilgrimages are not reserved strictly for Buddhists and/or Japanese people. Some of the major pilgrimages (such as the *Saigoku 33 Kannon-sho* or the *Shikoku henro*) have their own websites, sometimes accessible in multiple languages.[70] People from all around the world visit the sacred sites and document their own experiences.[71] What is

[68] Coming to life can be interpreted here literally and figuratively as well. Religious icons have always been regarded as living entities. There are many icon-origin myths in Japan. For more about these and the living icon concept, see, for example, MacWilliams 2004 or Rambelli 2002.

[69] Some of the folktales with Buddhist deities were collected and published in one volume in 1997, called the *Nihon no bukkyō minwa shū* (Japanese Buddhist Folktales). Among some ninety tales, there is, for example, one story where a weary traveler, a penniless girl, finds a roadside Jizō stone statue, she plays games with it, and uses it as a pillow. Then Jizō Bodhisattva appears in her dream and helps her get money so she can go home. (The story is called *Takara fukube* ['Treasure gourds'] and originates in Aomori Prefecture.)

[70] *Saigoku 33 Kannon sho junrei no tabi* URL: https://saikoku33.gr.jp/ (in Japanese). *Shikoku henro* URL: https://shikoku-tourism.com/en/shikoku-henro/shikoku-henro (in English).

[71] See, for example, a video interview with a French man after completing the *Shikoku henro* in 2020, who also completed other pilgrimages, such as the El Camino to Santiago de Compostela. URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wT28W0 Ec2MA&ab_channel=youmemeyoutokushima (title: *フランス人が他の巡礼地と四国遍路の違いを教えてくれた。A French told me the difference between other pilgrimages and Shikoku* by youmemeyou tokushima).

interesting about this phenomenon is that, by gaining popularity, *Shikoku henro*, for example, is becoming a Japanese kind of El Camino, where more and more foreigners experience a different kind of sacrality than they do on pilgrimages in Europe. This can be the result of a global spread of what we can call *spirituality*, rather than *religiosity*. But religiosity was never a common characteristic of the Japanese people. Pilgrimages only became widespread and available for commoners during the Edo period, however, travel was restricted for Japanese people (*tochi kinbaku*), therefore often religious motives had nothing to do with pilgrimages.[72] Although Buddhism in Japan always existed as a religious institution with various sects and branches, before the 19th century it was restricted to temples and mountain sites where monks practiced the teachings, and lay people were not involved in most of its daily operations and practices. Also, we can observe that since the first half of the 19th century Buddhism is becoming more and more secular in Japan, due to newly established (mostly lay) religious organizations (*shin shūkyō*) and some debated state legislations (such as the *nikujiki saitai* edict allowing monks to marry)[73] in the Meiji period.

Other than official websites, we find various internet sites and blogs about Buddhist pilgrimages or pilgrims who embarked on the journey. Also, there are websites for stone

[72] For more about the travel restrictions and pilgrimage travel permits, see Ishimori 1989 and Inoue 2017.

[73] The marriage of monks was first officially allowed in 1872 (for male monastics, see the Dajōkan's no. 133 edict of 25.04.1872) and 1873 (for female monastics, see the Dajōkan's no. 26 edict of 22.01.1873), when the Japanese government issued two laws proclaiming that male (1872) and female (1873) monastics can eat meat, grow their hair out, and marry.

buddhas and stone buddha pilgrimages as well. The *Iwa no hotoke wo tsutaeru* site offers information about some *magaibutsu* in the Kinki, Kyūshū, and Kantō regions.[74] More comprehensive and offering a lot more examples, however, is the site called *Nihon no sekibutsu meguri.*[75] The posts include many old stone buddhas in Kyoto City, Kyoto Prefecture, Shiga Prefecture, Nara City and Nara Prefecture. Other than the Kansai area, it also explores the most famous *magaibutsu* of Kyūshū. Similarly, we find a long list of stone buddha sites on the webpage titled *Sekibutsu ni ai ni iku* (Going to meet with the stone buddhas).[76] For every site that is listed, categorized by prefectures, there is a short description of the sculptures and directions to them.

**Conclusion**

It can be surmised that stone Buddhist sculptures represent a complex subject in Japanese cultural history, which can be approached from various perspectives and scientific fields. Their religious functions, may it be the visual material for mountain practices or wish-granting for common people, ensured their continued existence. These stone figures may well have been the chief connecting point of people and religion – and probably still are today. By placing them in cities, on roadsides, or mountain trails, the Japanese can literally encounter them in every aspect of their lives (e.g.,

[74] *Iwa no hotoke wo tsutaeru* URL: http://iwanohotoke.com/listhtml01to50/list0001text.html
[75] *Nihon no sekibutsu meguri* URL: http://shigeru.kommy.com/kyoutosekibutumegurisinai%20.htm
[76] *Sekibutsu ni ai ni iku* URL: http://kazesasou.com/hotoke/ hotoke_00_mokuji.html

going to work, visiting shrines or temples for major life events, or just going for a recreational hike to the mountains). Other than their primary functions, the statues can be considered artworks, and may have aesthetic values as well. Although some were carved by more skillful hands than others (the material is difficult to work with and their natural setting also could have made the process slightly more difficult), their existence is proof of dedication and faith, which was needed to make, maintain, and preserve them.

All major Buddhist centers have countless stone sculptures; therefore, this paper is hopefully just one of many to come on this subject. Mt. Kasuga is a fine example to demonstrate the syncretic nature of Japanese religiousness, the mountain being on the one hand a sacred spot for Kasuga Taisha, a major Shinto shrine since the Nara Period, and on the other, a place for Buddhist infused ascetic mountain practices. We find fine examples of *magaibutsu* on these hills, and we can meet almost all deities, which became popular in folk Buddhism, such as Jizō and Kannon Bodhisattvas, or Amida Buddha. The manyfold practices and teachings at Kōfukuji temple were crucial in the program of the numerous *magaibutsu*, carved into the cliffs, rocks, and caves of Mt. Kasuga during the Heian and Kamakura Periods.

Although it is said and experienced that religions and religiousness nowadays are becoming less and less prominent in the everyday lives of people throughout the world and in Japan as well, the various stone statues may have found new grounds for a new kind of popularity in the modern world. National and international tourism and the internet make

these statues available and approachable for the interested crowds more than ever, and no matter their purpose for viewing or visiting them, the statues and reliefs continue to be the focus of attention, for their long history, cultural assets, beautiful forms, or useful functions.

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*フランス人が他の巡礼地と四国遍路の違いを教えてくれた。A French told me the difference between other pilgrimages and Shikoku.* Youtube channel by youmemeyou tokushima.
URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wT28W0Ec2MA &ab _channel=youmeme youtokushima

# Studying the Kesa in Soto Zen Buddhism: A Small Pilgrimage from Kobe to the World

*Noriko ONOHARA*

In this paper, I will examine the clothing worn by Buddhist priests called *kesa* (袈裟). As a researcher of contemporary fashion, this discussion may inevitably become a pilgrimage into kesa research. In the first section of this paper, with Kobe as our base, I will begin with an academic inquiry into the theme of "fashion and kesa". I also participated in a *zazenkai* meditation session at a Soto Zen temple, where I studied under a master to read Buddhist texts on "clothing as Dharma". Using a needle and thread to craft my own kesa, and then to experience trying it on myself, I will present my findings here. In terms of the direction of my research, I wish to shed light on the possibilities of reading one piece of cloth as an example of textile culture. At the same time, I continue to seek answers to the fundamental and deeper question of "why people wear clothes".

The key to this lies in the discussion of kesa in the writings of *Shobogenzo* by Master Dogen. It is here I can observe the conceptualization of a new fashion theory.

This chapter is the fundamental result of investigations based on research in Kobe. From Kobe, I continue to study the kesa as it makes various points of contact throughout the country. Furthermore, as the *kesa* voyages out into the rest of the world, my research is ongoing as I observe this experience hands-on.

**Introduction: The Encounter with Zen – Kobe**

I was born in Osaka, a city near Kobe. As a Japanese person who absorbed both Western education and culture, by the end of my teenage years, I sensed a limitation in the binary oppositional world: I was forced to choose whether something is good or bad, right or wrong, and white or black, for instance, in my daily life. I spent my days in frustration, having to choose "between this or that" and living out my days as such. At the time, I attended a Christian women's university in Kobe. In the university library, I sought answers in aisles of Western philosophy books, feeling as though my heart was close to breaking. My father, a bibliophile, then gave me a book[1] which introduced the basics of practicing *zazen* meditation.[2] I spent my days reading that small volume. I also approached a teacher who taught social studies at high school while also being employed at a Buddhist temple. As this teacher listened to my grievances, he introduced me to a place where I could try zazen meditation. It was at the age of

[1] Shiojiri, Komei. 1952. *Tenbun to Aijō no Mondai* [The Problem of Destiny and Love]. Tokyo: Shakai Shiso-sha.

[2] "Za" means sitting in Japanese, "Zen" is from Zen Buddhism. The definition of "zazen" itself has lots of questions, therefore we shall understand the term as "simply sitting simply" in this paper.

19 that I experienced Zen and practicing zazen at the Eiheiji Temple in Fukui Prefecture, founded by Zen master Dogen, of Japan's Soto Zen religious school. During zazen, the pieces of clothing I came across most often were the ones designated for priest trainees, and this may have been my first encounter with kesa. During the Zen retreat, as part of our training and cleaning tasks, there were also times when we mended clothes.

To accept not "this or that", but rather "this *and* that", or even "neither this nor that" – to accept people and things as they are, in their "present state," - this was how my younger self sought to learn this through experience and experienced zazen. As I graduated from university, I was employed as a textile manufacturer. Eventually I sought courses on fashion and clothing, and enrolled in graduate school in order to be able to express my ideas through my own words. I moved to Kyoto and began to seriously pursue the path of a researcher. At the same time, at one point I was also participating in zazen sessions at the Soto Zen temple in Kyoto. When I decided to study abroad in Britain, I forgot about zazen for some time. Then I accepted a teaching position in a university and returned to Kobe. Though it had been a while since I had practiced zazen, the next occasion I remembered it was when I was performing field research while abroad again in Britain.

I felt my existence shifting between East and West and losing balance, something I had experienced repeatedly in my lifetime. In Britain, I shared a house with another anthropologist who had just given birth to a child. As the baby cried late into the night, I suffered from insomnia. From then on, because I could not sleep, or rather when I was not able to sleep, I decided to practice zazen again. There is a zazen state

between waking and sleeping, an experience that in English might be called "meditation". It was 15 years since I had practiced Zen meditation at Eiheiji Temple. From then on and until the present day, it has become a daily ritual for me to practice zazen nearly every morning.

After I returned from field research, by pure coincidence I happened to participate in "Zen wo Kiku Kai" (*Listen to Zen*),[3] an event held once a year organized by the Soto school. This annual event holds zazen sessions and lectures on Buddhism for regular citizens. One morning, rather than following my regular commute path, I chanced upon a different road and noticed an advertisement on a billboard, right in front of the venue for the event, Hyogo Prefecture Citizen's Hall. It announced an event that was to be held there later that evening. This was in January of 2007. I first met Master Hei Doki, at the Kinki Regional Programming Center Headquarters, in the first guided Zen meditation session of this "Zen wo Kiku Kai". Many years had already passed since I had participated in a regular schedule of zazen sessions in Kyoto. Master Hei was the head priest at Myokoji Temple in the Kita District in Kobe. I had known that his temple held monthly zazen sessions, during which he gave lectures on reading Zen Master Dogen's famously esoteric work *Shobogenzo* (正法眼蔵). At this time, I pondered deeply on the nature of human

[3] Since this is an event created "to have Zen become more widely known", various activities are held in different regions around the country. For example, one might try zazen sitting meditation that incorporates chairs, or listen to lectures from famous figures. In 2019, an event titled "Sound of ZEN" was held abroad in places like Australia. The "Kiku" in the Japanese title "Zen wo Kiku Kai" is written in hiragana letters, and has been translated as "The Sound of Zen" or "Listen to the silence" in English. More details can be found on the official website of Soto Zen: https://www.sotozen-net.or.jp/ (accessed 30 November 2021).

relationships. I felt desperately that I had reached the limitations of my own thinking. And so, I was quickly welcomed into the zazen sessions and have continued to participate in them into the present year of 2021.

**Zazen at Myokoji**

My encounter with Master Hei Doki was a great turning point in my life. To use a Buddhist phrase, this itself felt like *en* (縁), a destined bond for which I was extremely grateful. He has become an indispensable presence in my life, and the time spent in zazen sessions have been precious to me. In this way, Myokoji Temple remains a truly invaluable place.

Now I would like to introduce the legacy and career of the Masters who teach at zazen sessions and cultural centers run by major newspapers today. Master Hei Doki (See Fig. 1) was born in 1940 and completed his PhD in Buddhist studies program at Komazawa University. In 1965, he was hired as an assistant professor at Komazawa Women's Junior College, and remained there between 1968 and 1974. In 1971, he became the temple master of Myokoji Temple in Kita District in Kobe, so he gave up his position at the university, and returned from Tokyo to Kobe. In 1997, he was employed as the Senior Commissioner at the Kinki Regional Programming Center Headquarters, where he stayed until 2019. At present, since 2018, he has been providing guidance to priest trainees as Seido Koushoji in Kyoto (the original temple in Fukakusa was destroyed by a fire and was relocated to Uji), where Zen Master Dogen had resided.

Fig. 1. Master Hei Douki at Myokoji Temple (Festival of the Buddha's Birth, 2012). He wore a purple colored kesa to celebrate the Buddha's birthday. His son (front right) had on a muddy yellow color, called *Mokuran-iro*, which is characteristic of kesa taste.

Fig. 2. Myokoji Temple

After participating in zazen sessions for 15 years, as research for this book, I was able to interview the Master on the temple's history for the first time. Myokoji (See Fig. 2) was established in 1953 (Showa-era year 28) by the Master's grandmother, when a former country residence was rebuilt as a temple. In the same year, the Religious Corporation Act was revised. However, Japan was still under American occupation post-war, and there were no extra resources to build a temple. The grandmother was posthumously awarded the Dharma name "Myoko" and the temple was named in her honor. Located in an area called Ura Rokko in Kobe, it lies 370 meters above sea level, where many vacation residences line up as a popular place to escape the summer heat. The history of the

*kaizan* (founding of the temple) is recorded by his mother, and she describes the difficulties of becoming a nun at the time.

Master Hei was a middle child among five children, but because it had been decided that he would become successor to the family temple, he renounced the world in the later years of his elementary school. He became the second-generation priest at Myokoji in 1971, and when his father passed away in 1974, he returned from Tokyo to devote himself to the priesthood. The zazenkai sessions started in 1980 with the same two-part format they have today: 1) the practice of zazen meditation; and 2) the reading of the *Shobogenzo* text. While sitting on *tatami* mats, the first hour is spent in *hekimen zazen* (zazen faced to the walls), then the second hour follows with his lectures. Although there is a break in August while the temple closes for *Obon* festivities, otherwise the sessions are held monthly. 2021 will be the 41st year the program has continued. In 1995 when the Great Hanshin Earthquake partially destroyed the temple, a temporary facility was quickly set up in order to continue the sessions. Currently, Japan is also in the middle of the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic, but other than when a state of emergency was declared, the zazenkai sessions have still continued while participants adhere to social distancing measures. After the zazen and lectures, the participants used to enjoy relaxing and asking questions to the Zen master while having tea together. Due to the coronavirus pandemic, this teatime activity has disappeared. Master Hei's wife used to make origami coasters using the packaging for sweets boxes, on which both Japanese and Western sweets would be

given. At New Year's time, Hei-Roshi (old master) would pass around *amazake* (sweet Japanese sake) that he had made himself.

At the zazenkai at Myokoji, when reading the *Shobogenzo*, we once studied a chapter called "*Den-e* (伝衣)". As a fashion researcher, this was when I finally confronted the kesa as a research subject. Up until then, I had already been accustomed to sewing small kesa called *rakusu* (絡子), a type of *gojô-e* (五条衣) which are everyday wear for Zen monks (See Fig. 3). My mother, who was skilled with sewing, aided me as I also relied on a book called *Kesa no Kenkyū* ("The Study of Kesa")[4] (See Fig. 4). This was a book that I had found in the late 1990s, discovering it in a secondhand bookshop in Tokyo as a graduate student. After purchasing it, it remained dormant on my shelves for a long time. I know that I opened its pages when I had come to Kobe and was already sitting in on the zazen sessions at Myokoji, but I cannot say for certain when exactly that may have been. Beyond time and place, I had prepared my research on kesa, but it was in Kobe that it truly began to blossom. The editor of that book on kesa, Master Sawaki Kodo, once called Soto Zen as "Kesa School". And Master Hei had studied under Old master Sawaki. Hei-Roshi has recounted in zazenkai and lectures how he was bestowed with a rakusu from Sawaki Roshi himself.

[4] Kyuma, Ecchu & Kodo Sawaki. 1967. *Kesa no Kenkyū* [The Study of Kesa]. Tokyo: Daihorin-kaku.

Fig. 3. The author, wearing the first Rakusu she had sewn, at a Japanese performance event she organized in London (2010)

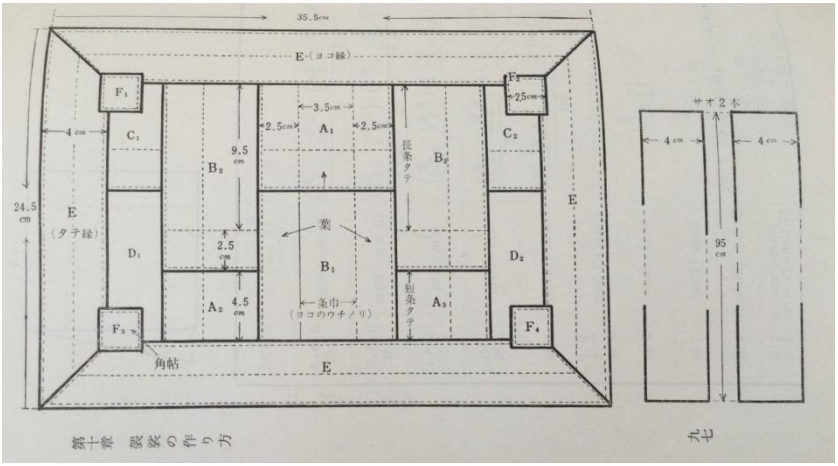



Fig. 4. Patterns (page excerpt from *The Study of Kesa*)

I myself was appointed as the Committee Chair of the Annual Conference of the Japanese Association for Semiotic Studies (JASS), which I belonged to. In May 2012, I organized a national conference at the Kobe Fashion Museum, Japan on the theme "Kiru/Nugu" ("To dress/undress"). In one of the sessions titled "(Hito wo) Kiru (to iu) Koto)" ("On Wearing [People]"), we requested that Master Hei take the podium. He graciously spoke on the subject of what it means for Buddhist priests to wear kesa (See Fig. 5).[5] After the lecture, there was also an opportunity to display kesa itself for the audience to see with their own eyes. Human beings are animals who wear clothing. The act of wearing clothes may be what makes humans unique. My hypothesis was confirmed while studying kesa, and continues to progress in my collection of data as a fashion researcher. When we think about dressing, we cannot disassociate it from the idea of undressing. In Buddhism, there is a term called *gedatsu* (解脱). Rather than seeking "enlightenment", it calls to the act of "undressing one's ego" as the ultimate goal. This could be expressed as "becoming oneself", and can demonstrate the act of "wearing one's ego".

[5] See conference report: "Japanese Association for Semiotic Studies (JASS): Focus on Fashion", SEMIOTIX XN-8.2012. *Semiotix: A Global Information Magazine*. https://semioticon.com/semiotix/2012/08/japanese-association-for-semiotic-studies-jass-focus-on-fashion/, (accessed 30 November 2021)

Fig. 5. Old Master Hei at the Conference
of the Japanese Association of Semiotics Studies (2012)

**My Foray into Kesa Research**

In the next section I will decode the foundational base of my research on kesa. The logical analysis of "what is kesa?" experiments with the concept of "fashion and kesa". By preserving the Japanese in the original kesa research document completed by Master Hei, I encourage English readers to understand the words and definitions provided in this text. It is my wish that by seeing the words as symbols and

*kanji* phrases in graphical form, one may experience the visual appreciation of these terms and discover new meanings behind them. The sayings and lectures from the regular zazen sessions are interspersed throughout this paper, and where possible, excerpts are cited with date and time for greater clarity.

On the clothing of humans, from a cultural perspective, there are numerous meanings which span space and time. This is also accompanied by the phenomena of change and evolution through trends. If we observe the history of kesa, we witness the same occurrence and can confirm the aspect of fashion applying to kesa. By understanding the formation of kesa as an article of clothing, we may inquire into the significance of kesa in Japanese Soto Buddhism and in its transmission. Alongside the importance of meals, Zen Master Dogen instructed disciples of Buddhism on how "the act of dressing" is a valuable training ritual. In an esoteric volume of text called the *Shobogenzo,*[6] a chapter entitled "On the Spiritual Merits of Kesa: 袈裟功徳 *Kesa-kudoku*"[7] delves more deeply into kesa. Through the medium of kesa, I wish to take this opportunity to consider the core values of what it means for human beings to wear clothing.

[6] In this paper, I mainly reference the "*Den-e*" included in the Iwanami Bunko Edition. Mizuno, Yaoko (ed.) 1990 Dogen. *Shobogenzo* (2). Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten. pp. 247-281.

[7] Both "*Den-e*" and "*Kesa-Kudoku*" are dated as published on the first date of winter (October 1st) in the first year of the Nioji era (1240). However, the "*Den-e*" scroll written at Koshoji Temple is the accurate date. The "*Kesa-kodoku*" was later written, when Zen master Dogen moved to Eiheiji Temple and supplemented with additional texts. Mizuno, Yaoko. 2007 *Shobogenzo Kesa Kudoku wo Yomu* [On Reading "Shobogenzo Kesa Kudoku"]. Tokyo: Daihorin-kaku. pp. 6-7.

## 1. On Kesa

### What Is *kesa*?

Kesa is clothing worn by *Bukkyôsô* (仏教僧), who are Buddhist monks and nuns. It may also be called *ritsu-e* (律衣) or *nyohō-e* (如法衣). *Ritsu* refers to the detailed living regulations recorded for disciples of Buddhism, in either individual or communal living situations. That is to say, for any behavior not befitting Buddhist disciples, Buddha's direct warnings may prompt otherwise, or include punishment to serve as correction. Such rules are carefully recorded, and as such, provide a daily living log for the Buddha and his disciples. In translation, the most famous are the Five Major Principles, *Godai-ritsu* which consists of *shibun-ritsu*, *gobun-ritsu*, *juju-ritsu*, *sogi-ritsu*, and *ubu-ritsu*.

Kesa and Buddhism were founded approximately at the same time, and have about 2500 years of history.[8] Just as a Master teaches the laws (of Buddhism) to their disciples, the kesa are also passed down. According to one precept, Buddhists will receive a kesa from their masters once in their lifetime. The Master and disciple will face each other one on one for a ceremony lasting one week long. Throughout the ritual it is forbidden to look elsewhere. Along with the clothing, the teachings of Buddhism are passed on, and kesa plays a symbolic role for Buddhists. In Buddhism the most important Dharma is something which is not visible to the eye, but is nevertheless materialized in the form of clothing.

[8] Kyuma, Ecchu & Kodo Sawaki. 1967. *Kesa no Kenkyū* [The Study of Kesa]. Tokyo: Daihorin-kaku. p. 15.

As evidence of receiving the Buddha Dharma, there is a "physical being" which is also referred to as *shôkei* (証契).

**The Origin of Kesa**

Kesa has been sewn according to a traditional method lasting 2500 years since the time of the Buddha. Referred to as *kassetsu-e*, the base uses a cloth called *setsuru* (截縷). By patching together these pieces into clothing, together it is completed as one single piece of cloth (See Fig. 6). If there are no scraps of cloth, the cloth is first cut before it is crafted together. The fabric of the cloth is highly valued and can also be exchanged for currency like coins. By cutting down its value as an ornamental item, by cutting the cloth into small scraps, it is transformed into a worthless product that people no longer want. This represents the act of cutting down the worth of other people's feelings, thoughts, and desires.

On the origin of kesa, the following episodes[9] are well known. When Buddhism was born, there were many thriving religions in India. It became necessary to create clothing in order to distinguish the Buddhist monks from others. As a devotee of the Buddha's teachings, a king by the name of Bimbisāra once dismounted his horse and politely greeted a passerby who was not a Buddhist student. In order to avoid such confusion, the king commanded the Buddhist students to wear clothing that would help distinguish them from other students. This is the beginning of this particular piece of clothing as uniform which could indicate that one was a member of the Buddhist religious group.

[9] Kyuma, Ecchu. 2000. *Kesa no Hanashi* [A Story About Kesa]. Kyoto: Hozokan. pp. 7-11.

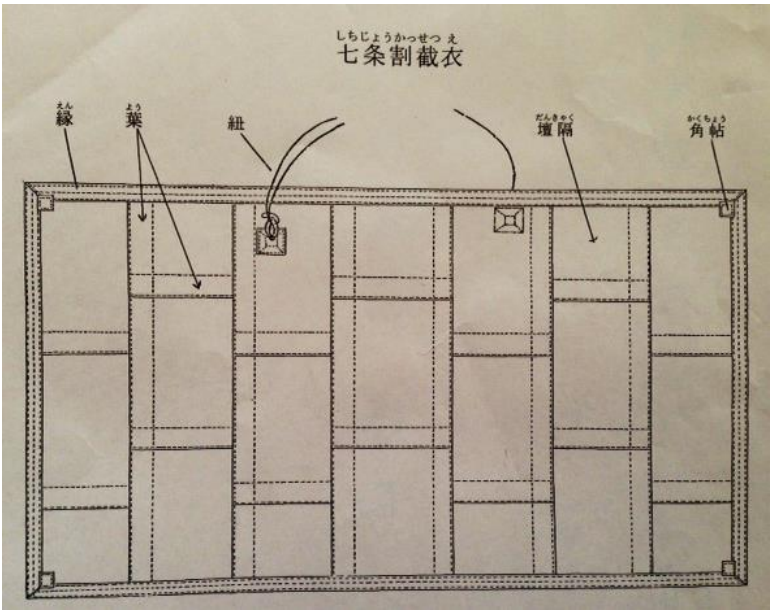



Fig. 6 The figure of *Shichi-jô Kassetsu-e*, which Hei-Roshi gave the participants at a zazenkai (2014)

Ananda, another disciple of the Buddha, as well as his nephew, was impressed by India's beautiful fields, and this landscape was the beginning of the image of kesa. As the rice fields ripened, the view of their plentiful harvest was incorporated as a metaphor in kesa. The name of *fukuden-e* (福田衣) comes from this meaning. When thinking about its configuration, the harvest culture and kesa cannot be separated. In the hot temperatures of India, it is easy to understand, by considering the climate, that people wore one piece of cloth on their bodies by wrapping it around directly, without either sewing or cutting. In Japanese Buddhism, this form of dress has evolved since departing its originating country of India and

passing through China. This religious clothing is the outfit of a religious organization and becomes its standard uniform. Its motifs were born from designs symbolizing nature.

**The Etymology of 色 (*Shiki*) "Color"**

In Sanskrit, kesa is called "kasaya" and was originally a word to express "color". In Japanese, *kesashoku* is used as a phrase, with a nuanced meaning of a "cloudy color". Not a primary color but a mixed shade, it is actually a red-toned hue. In a sense, kesashoku might refer to a "dirtied" color. When one refers to kesa as *ejiki-e* (壊色布) or *kenjiki-e* (間色衣), or also *zen-e* (染衣), it is in reference to this quality of color.

Kesa consists of pieces of cloth of colors people do not particularly favor, something that is far from being considered beautiful. In Buddhism, the word "color" (*shiki*) is a term imbued with unique meaning, and although we read the etymology of the word "kesa" differently, its relation to the concept of color is intriguing.

In the Indian sect of Buddhism, there are five colors which are seen as taboo: the primary colors of blue, red, yellow, white, and black. These colors are also known as the five *seishiki* (正色), and were not allowed to be used in religious clothing (for more details, see Fig. 7 reference materials[10]). To avoid eye-catching primary colors, if only primary colors are available, the cloth is to be re-dyed. Colors are easily tied to symbols of wealth and power. People tend to like bright, catchy

[10] By Master Hei Doki. (This was distributed during his lecture to the participants of the Japanese Association of Semiotic Studies (JASS) conference, held at the Kobe Fashion Museum, Japan in May 2012.

colors, so by “destroying” these kinds of colors, one can sever themselves from the others’ preferences. Kesa often has complex hues. Originally, Buddhist disciples dyed the cloth themselves, and because the colors did not result in fixed batches, it was difficult to describe them as any particular color.

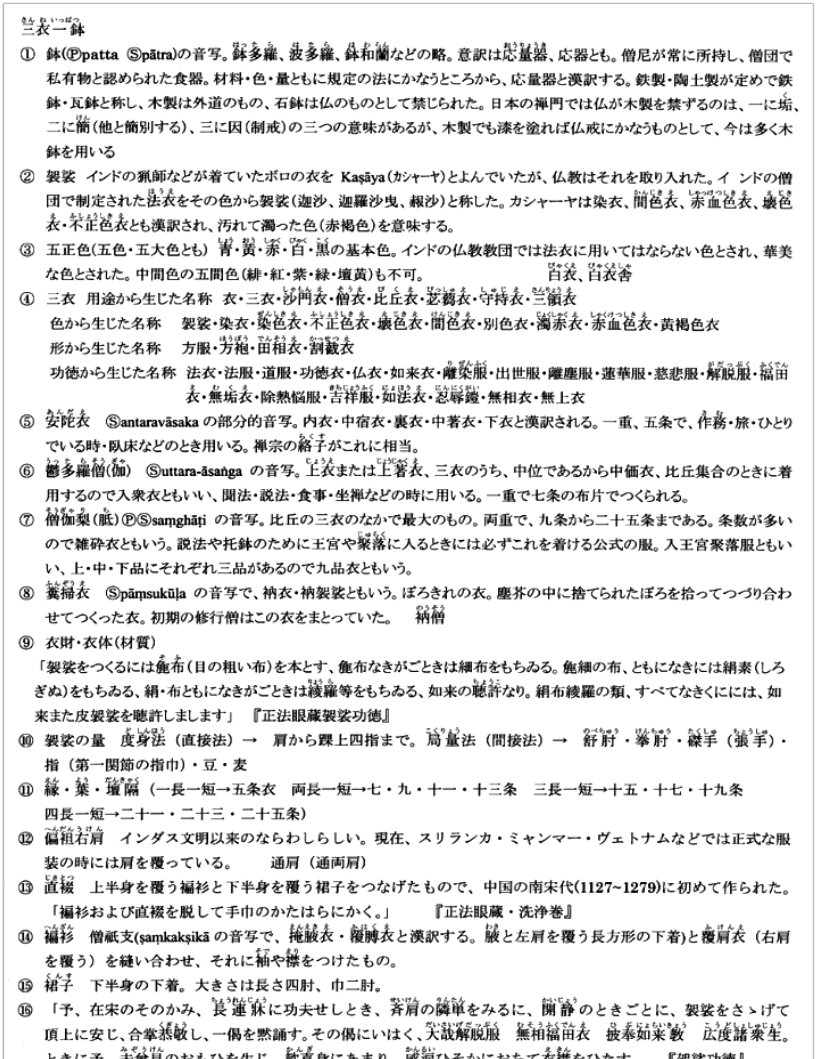
Dyeing clothing goods as a whole is called *senjō* (染浄), but on the other hand, there is also the act of putting a small spot on one part of the kesa, which is called *tenjō* (点浄) (See Fig. 8). Tenjō is an important and unique act for kesa. It carries the meaning of putting a mark to differentiate it from the possessions of the others such as *zaike* (在家) or *gedô* (外道). Now, why would putting on a piece of clothing a spot be an act of “purification”? For new things such as cloth and clothes, it represents a stance of humility, by putting something on your body after it is slightly stained. This itself is an act of cleansing one’s heart.

Fashion is the phenomenon[11] of seeing something being temporarily assigned the value of “newness”. But the pursuit of newness can lead to a battle with yourself, and lead to envy and prejudice towards others. Although soiling something seems counterintuitive to the notion of purification, it tells us to remain modest even with new things. In other words, it is a purification method to appease the heart.

In the structure of kesa, “body”, “color”, and “measurement” are determined by the three aspects of “materials”, “colors”, and “amount of cloth”. Furthermore, we will include “dress code” to explain these four perspectives. The central theme covered in

[11] Barthes, Roland. 1967. *Système de la mode*. Paris: Seuil. Trans. Nobuo Sato. 1972. [Mode No Taikei]. Tokyo: Misuzu Shobo.

this section was “color”. In the next part, we will continue with the study of materials, after which we will also touch upon “body” and “measurement”.



三衣一鉢

① 鉢(Ⓟpatta Ⓢpātra)の音写。鉢多羅、波多羅、鉢和蘭などの略。意訳は応量器、応器とも。僧尼が常に所持し、僧団で私有物と認められた食器。材料・色・量ともに規定の法にかなうところから、応量器と漢訳する。鉄製・陶土製が定めで鉄鉢・瓦鉢と称し、木製は外道のもの、石鉢は仏のものとして禁じられた。日本の禅門では仏が木製を禁ずるのは、一に垢、二に觸(他と觸別する)、三に因(制戒)の三つの意味があるが、木製でも漆を塗れば仏戒にかなうものとして、今は多く木鉢を用いる

② 袈裟 インドの猟師などが着ていたボロの衣を Kaṣāya(カシャーヤ)とよんでいたが、仏教はそれを取り入れた。インドの僧団で制定された法衣をその色から袈裟(迦沙、迦羅沙曳、赧沙)と称した。カシャーヤは染衣、間色衣、赤血色衣、壊色衣・不正色衣とも漢訳され、汚れて濁った色(赤褐色)を意味する。

③ 五正色(五色・五大色とも) 青・黄・赤・白・黒の基本色。インドの仏教教団では法衣に用いてはならない色とされ、華美な色とされた。中間色の五間色(緋・紅・紫・緑・壇黄)も不可。 白衣、白衣舎

④ 三衣 用途から生じた名称 衣・三衣・沙門衣・僧衣・比丘衣・忍辱衣・守持衣・三領衣
色から生じた名称 袈裟・染衣・染色衣・不正色衣・壊色衣・間色衣・別色衣・濁赤衣・赤血色衣・黄褐色衣
形から生じた名称 方服・方袍・田相衣・割截衣
功徳から生じた名称 法衣・法服・道服・功徳衣・仏衣・如来衣・離染服・出世服・離塵服・蓮華服・慈悲服・解脱服・福田衣・無垢衣・除熱悩服・吉祥服・如法衣・忍辱鎧・無相衣・無上衣

⑤ 安陀衣 Ⓢantaravāsaka の部分的音写。内衣・中宿衣・裏衣・中著衣・下衣と漢訳される。一重、五条で、作務・旅・ひとりでいる時・臥床などのとき用いる。禅宗の絡子がこれに相当。

⑥ 鬱多羅僧(伽) Ⓢuttara-āsaṅga の音写。上衣または上著衣、三衣のうち、中位であるから中価衣、比丘集合のときに着用するので入衆衣ともいい、聞法・説法・食事・坐禅などの時に用いる。一重で七条の布片でつくられる。

⑦ 僧伽梨(胝)ⓅⓈsaṃghāṭi の音写。比丘の三衣のなかで最大のもの。両重で、九条から二十五条までである。条数が多いので雑砕衣ともいう。説法や托鉢のために王宮や聚落に入るときには必ずこれを着ける公式の服。入王宮聚落服ともいい、上・中・下品にそれぞれ三品があるので九品衣ともいう。

⑧ 糞掃衣 Ⓢpāṃsukūla の音写で、衲衣・納製袈裟ともいう。ぼろきれの衣。塵芥の中に捨てられたぼろを拾ってつづり合わせてつくった衣。初期の修行僧はこの衣をまとっていた。 衲僧

⑨ 衣財・衣体(材質)
「袈裟をつくるには麁布(目の粗い布)を本とす、麁布なきがごときは細布をもちゐる。麁細の布、ともになきには絹素(しろぎぬ)をもちゐる、絹・布ともになきがごときは綾羅等をもちゐる、如来の聴許なり。絹布綾羅の類、すべてなきくにには、如来また皮袈裟を聴許しましまします」『正法眼蔵袈裟功徳』

⑩ 袈裟の量 度身法(直接法) → 肩から踝上四指まで。 量法(間接法) → 舒肘・拳肘・縵手(張手)・指(第一関節の指巾)・豆・麦

⑪ 縁・葉・壇隔 (一長一短→五条衣 両長一短→七・九・十一・十三条 三長一短→十五・十七・十九条
四長一短→二十一・二十三・二十五条)

⑫ 偏袒右肩 インダス文明以来のならわしらしい。現在、スリランカ・ミャンマー・ヴェトナムなどでは正式な服装の時には肩を覆っている。 通肩(通両肩)

⑬ 直裰 上半身を覆う褊衫と下半身を覆う裙子をつなげたもので、中国の南宋代(1127~1279)に初めて作られた。
「褊衫および直裰を脱して手巾のかたはらにかく。」 『正法眼蔵・洗浄巻』

⑭ 褊衫 僧祇支(saṃkakṣikā の音写で、掩腋衣・覆膊衣と漢訳する。腋と左肩を覆う長方形の下着)と覆肩衣(右肩を覆う)を縫い合わせ、それに紐や襟をつけたもの。

⑮ 裙子 下半身の下着。大きさは長さ四肘、巾二肘。

⑮ 「予、在宋のそのかみ、長連牀に功夫せしとき、斉肩の隣単をみるに、開静のときごとに、袈裟をさゝげて頂上に安じ、合掌恭敬し、一偈を黙誦す。その偈にいはく、大哉解脱服 無相福田衣 披奉如来教 広度諸衆生。ときに予、宋曾見のおもひを生じ、歓喜身にあまり、感涙ひそかにおちて衣襟をひたす。 『袈裟功徳』

Fig. 7. Documents on *kesa* written by Master Hei

## 2. On Purification

### *Funzō-e* (糞掃衣) and *Tai* (体)

Dogen is quoted as saying that *funzō-e* (糞掃衣), waste cloth, is the most purifying kind among kesa.[12] Funzō-e represents the kesa made from clothes which people have thrown out and no longer care about. It transcribes the Sanskrit word for "pamskura". "Pams" refers to soiled things,

Fig. 8. The second Rakusu sewn by the author (see the Tenjō mark on the upper section)

[12] Mizuno, Yaoko. 2007 *Shobogenzo Kesa Kudoku wo Yomu* [On Reading "Shobogenzo Kesa Kudoku"]. Tokyo: Daihorin-kaku. pp. 171-177.

"kura" refers to a ditch, and together they mean a place where dirty things have accumulated. It can also be called *nō-e* (衲衣) or *nōkesa* (衲袈裟). *Nō* (衲) can refer to rags of clothing, and illustrates the characteristic of funzō-e to be made by collecting scraps of cloth out of garbage and putting them together. (See Fig. 8)

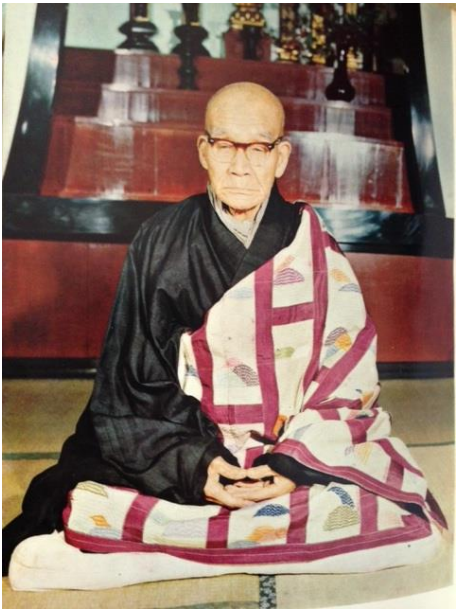


Fig. 9 Old Master Sawaki Kodo in his *Funzōe*
(from *The Study of Kesa*)

Dogen sets out ten kinds of waste clothes[13] based on the *shibun-ritsu* (四分律): 1) *Goshaku-e* (牛嚼衣) = clothes chewed on by cows; 2) *Sokō-e* (鼠噛衣) = clothes bitten by mice;

[13] *Ibid.* pp. 177-181.

3) *Kashō-e* (火燒衣) = clothes that were burnt by fire; 4) *Gessui-e* (月水衣) = clothes stained by women's menstruation; 5) *Sanbu-e* (産婦衣) = clothes soiled by giving childbirth; 6) *Shinmyō-e* (神廟衣) = clothes offered at the mausoleum (of one's ancestors); 7) *Chōken-ne* (塚間衣) = clothes of the dead picked up at graves; 8) *Gugan-ne* (求願衣) = clothes used in prayer; 9) *Ōshiki-e* (王職衣) = clothes assigned according to rank in court; 10) *Ōgen-e* (往還衣) = clothes worn by the dead on the way to the crematorium, and discarded on their return.

These ten categories of clothes listed above are disliked and avoided by people, essentially being viewed as "unclean" clothes. From the discarded clothes, one chooses those without holes, or those where stains may be removed by washing. If a cloth is threadbare, it may be sewn to be fortified and still be usable.[14] However, to wear kesa is not to purposely look ragged in appearance, nor is it to make clothes beautiful again. It is a specific training in the practice of Buddhism. Kesa must exist beyond the borders of *hei-i* (弊衣), disadvantaged clothes, or beautiful clothes. To wear kesa, we must pass on the flesh and bones of the three generations of Buddhas. Furthermore, it is implied that our human body is the same as the body of the Buddha, and can wear the same clothes as the Buddha.

Here, let us also discuss the material = "body" of kesa. Fundamentally, kesa utilizes *sofu* (麁布), a type of coarse cloth. If that is unavailable, silk can be used, and if that is also

[14] Matsumura, Kaoruko. 2006. *Funzōe no Kenkyū* [Research on Funzō-e]. Kyoto: Hozokan. pp. 57-84.

unavailable, then a twill woven cloth can be used. When none of that is available, one can use the skins of animals, Zen Master Dogen was noted for saying.[15] About funzō-e, the same thing could be said, but it does not matter what material it is made from. What matters is how that material was treated and prepared. In Buddhism, "to be satisfied with little desire" is the equivalent of "not being selective with preferences". As much as possible, one should use materials close at hand, such as those provided by Buddhist parishioners, and show appreciation in their use.

Fashion itself is a question of preference, but from this point, kesa is a clothing that is removed from fashion. What are the necessary elements for kesa? Its value lies in "purification". One can wash something to clean it, and technically this achieves the intent of purification. However, this is far from the concept of "cleansing". To put it differently, purification can also mean "to throw away life's gains."[16] By using coarse cloth as the base, one does not choose material (*tai*) on one's own as funzô-e is created by what is far from human desires. It is an element of important significance in the structure of kesa. It is not about the opposing concepts of clean vs. unclean. Rather, it shows how kesa exists in a place beyond what is pure and impure.

[15] Mizuno, Yaoko. 2007 *Shobogenzo Kesa Kudoku wo Yomu* [On Reading "Shobogenzo Kesa Kudoku"]. Tokyo: Daihorin-kaku. pp. 181-187.
[16] Kyuma, Ecchu & Kodo Sawaki. 1967. *Kesa no Kenkyū* [The Study of Kesa]. Tokyo: Daihorin-kaku.p. 41.

### *San-ne-ippatsu* 三衣一鉢 (3 Clothes and 1 bowl) and "Measurement"

Earlier we noted how Zen Master Dogen said that funzō-e was the most prized type of cloth among kesa. Buddhism originated in India and had crossed China before arriving in Japan, but because of the changes in country, temperature, and climate, kesa had gradually changed to become accepted as something else. Similar to today's fashion, clothing travels abroad and transforms in both shape and purpose.

In the semitropical climate of India, one layer of clothing is sufficient dress for daily wear. However, if one crosses the Chinese mainland, there awaits the extreme cold of winter. Japan itself experiences four seasons of weather in its climate. This alone adds to the number of pieces of clothing worn, and the style of dress also changes according to the season.

Fig. 10. Kosho-ji Temple
(photographed by the author)

*San-ne-ippatsu* is a phrase in Buddhism which expresses that becoming a Buddhist priest means one must let go of personal material wealth. It is believed that three changes of clothing and one bowl are all that is needed. A *hachi* is an eating bowl that monks and nuns always possess and is recognized as an accepted personal belonging by the priesthood. In this container, the elements of material, color, and volume are determined to pass the required standards, and is known as an *oryoki*[17]— "a meter or measurer".

"*San-ne*"[18] describes the three layers of kesa that are allowed in Buddhist priesthood. The san-ne can also be used as a *futon* sheet and pillow, so it can be utilized as bedding as well. It is not only "clothing", but rather cloth which goes beyond "clothing". Of the three types, there are 1) *anda-e* (安陀衣); 2) *utta-rasō* (鬱多羅僧); and 3) *sōgyari* (僧伽梨). Each of these are derived from Sanskrit in part or in whole, transcribed in Chinese, and then translated into Japanese. Let us examine the characteristics of each layer. Anda-e is the inner layer, or lining. The equivalent to underwear, it is one of the layers in *Gojō* called *Icchô-ittan* (一長一短)", also known as "one long, one short."[19]. Whether one is working, traveling, or by themselves, it can also be worn in the bedroom, and may even be described as a type of personal loungewear for indoors. In India, this cloth is worn directly on the body as one

[17] At Koshoji-temple (Fig.10) in Kyoto, an annual Zazen retreat called Shu-rei-zen is held every autumn. Participants can experience vegetarian meals in the Soto Zen school manner with a set of bowls called *oryoki*.

[18] *Ibid.* pp. 28-33.

[19] *Jō* (条) is a long, narrow piece of cloth referring to an *obi*-like sash. "*Icchô-ittan* (一長一短)" describes how the long side of the cloth and the short side of the cloth are connected together to make one *jō* piece.

layer. In China and Japan, due to the difference in climate and environment, this naturally faded away and now no longer appears to be used. In Zen Buddhism today, it takes the form of a small-sized *rakusu* (絡子) which is hung from the neck to the chest, and is worn as daily wear. Utta-rasō is equivalent to outerwear. Of the three articles of clothing, it represents the middle layer (second piece of cloth) worn on the body. It is worn for times such as *monpō* (listening to Buddhist teachings), *seppō* (the studying of Buddhist texts), meals, or zazen meditation. As common daily wear, one piece is made with *shichijō* cloth pieces called *Nichô-ittan* (二長一短).

Sōgyari is the largest among the three types of clothes. It is a double-layered (lined) garment with nine to twenty-five strips, known as *kubon-e* (九品衣). Used as formal wear, it is essentially clothing worn for outings. For *seppô* textual studies and *takuhatsu* rounds with begging bows, kubon-e is always worn when entering a royal palce or *juraku* (聚楽). Each of these three is further categorized and given the following names according to the number of *jō* (strips of cloth) used: 1) *gebon* (下品) = for 9, 11, 13 strips of cloth; 2) *chûbon* (中品) = for 15, 17, 19 strips of cloth; 3) *jōbon* (上品) = 21, 23, 25 strips of cloth.

Up to this point, we have examined kesa through the perspective of “measurement”. In the Heian and Kamakura eras, cloth was exchanged for rice and had the same value as currency. People would contribute cloth to temples as a way to express their devotion and gratitude. The priesthood would receive this *o-fuse* as a material donation, and from

that cloth they would make kesa which they would wear.[20] Like patchwork, many scraps are joined together to make jō strips. These multiple strips are then sewn together and form the basic shape of it. There may also be patterns (such as *toyama* "mountain landscapes") and other concepts[21] that emerge in the funzō-e.

Buddhists view life and death in equal terms. To dress oneself in kesa, which is seen as the Dharma of its own, it serves beyond representing two oppositional values: "clean vs. unclean," or as such, viewing the separation between "holy vs. common". The actual intention is to dress oneself in these ideas as we live our lives.

## 3. Koromo and the Body

### How to Wear Kesa on One's Body = *Takkesahō* (搭袈裟法)[22]

According to *Shibun-ritsu*, kesa must be worn around the body to cover the *sanrin* (三輪) "three wheels" (three areas including both the knees and the navel). In other words, approximately one-third of the body is hidden. Essentially, kesa cannot be an issue of personal grooming, but rather must be worn as a practical article of clothing (See Fig. 11). The important point is to tidy one's self and to wear it neatly.

[20] Although factory-manufactured *kesa* are now sold at clothing shops for religious wear, this ritual still continues today.
[21] Matsumura, Kaoruko. 2006. *Funzōe no Kenkyū* [Research on Funzō-e]. Kyoto: Hozokan. pp. 125-132. In the Fukuda-kai, a group that still sews *kesa*, they raise the examples of "mountains, clouds, squares".
[22] Kyuma, Ecchu & Kodo Sawaki. 1967. *Kesa no Kenkyū* [The Study of Kesa]. Tokyo: Daihorin-kaku. pp. 190-202.

This is not limited to one's personal appearance. Beyond the visual, it can reflect the purity of one's inner self as well.

In India, kesa is a practical piece of monk's clothing. A single kesa robe was used to express the act of leaving the worldly world of ordination. Meanwhile, in China, the cold temperatures of East Asia were a strong factor in characterizing kesa as full-dress clothing. Rather than a practical piece of clothing, it was worn on the outside as the topmost layer, and developed as an item to be seen. Under governmental authority, Buddhism could not survive in China, and because of this fate, kesa oftentimes was worn as a decorative clothing.

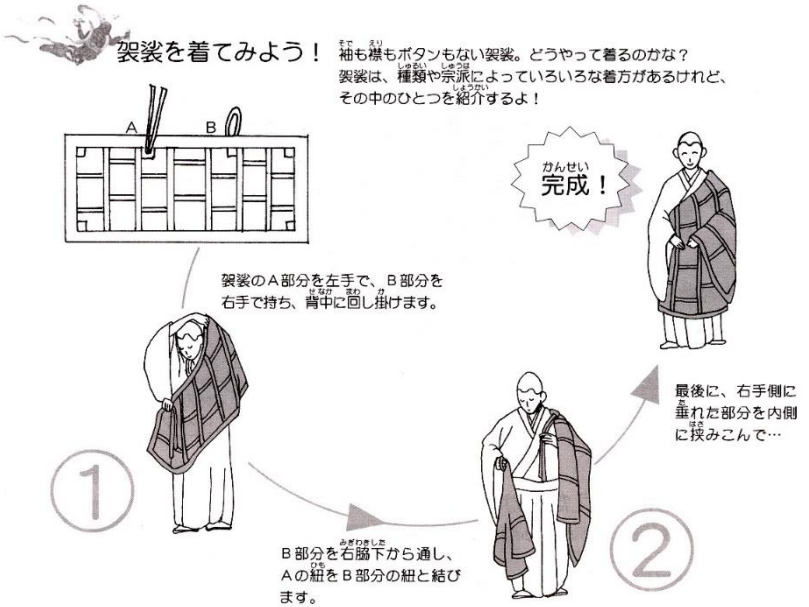



Fig. 11. A document for the workshop held at the special exhibition of kesa at Kyoto National Museum (*Transmitting Robes, Linking Mind: The World of Buddhist Kasaya*, 2010). The illustration demonstrates how to wear a kesa, using standing postures for better understanding.

As Buddhism made its way to Japan from China, there is still a great Chinese influence not only through the Buddhist teachings, but in existing examples of kesa. Some were splendid and decorative, and they increasingly became a symbolic form of clothing. Before Kamakura Buddhism's "Hō-ō (法皇)" (emperors to be priests) era, because of this position, kesa had to be particularly flamboyant.

Now, let us summarize how to dress in concise terms. There are two fixed ways to dress. *Tsurryokenta* (通両肩搭) is a style in which both shoulders are covered, and is often seen on Buddhist statues. When wearing kesa with numerous strips of cloth, it is often at a formal situation, so this is often abbreviated as *tsu-ken* (通肩) (shoulder reinforcement). *Hendann-uken* (偏袒右肩) is a style in which the right shoulder is exposed, and this is the more common way to dress. This came from the fact that monks in training were expected to dress comfortably so that they could be useful to their superiors at any given time. While this can be because most people are right-handed, in India the left-hand is considered unclean, and so it can be interpreted as a way to also hide the left-hand side.

Kesa originates from Buddhism, and was adapted with several changes in the process of introducing Buddhism. Dressing is a physical act that is rooted in the lives of human beings. Even though kesa as religious wear has certain special characteristics, even if certain elements are inherited just as they are, it is also inevitable that its form may change depending on that land's climate and weather. As new forms are standardized, this may give rise to a style or design that becomes unique to that country. The same holds true for the

philosophy and attitudes toward kesa. Ultimately, the purpose of kesa is to cover the body. Clothes protect the body, and separate humans from animals through a sense of shame over nakedness. The wearing of kesa can also show the fundamental relationship between human beings and cloth.

**The Transmission of Kesa**

As described earlier in the introduction, kesa is also called denpō-e (伝法衣), or traditional clothing. It is a special item the Master gives to a disciple, as proof of passing down the principles of Buddhism, Buddha Dharma. From this characteristic, kesa can take on an authoritative meaning and be associated with power.

It has been said that the kesa of the founder of Chinese Zen, Darma-daishi (the 28th generation after Shakamuni), was inherited by the 6th generation Zen master, Daikan Huineng. Kesa was a symbol of the transmission of the Dharma of Bodhidharma to Master Huineng, and the Kataku Jinne (荷沢神会) strongly advocated the legitimacy of his master's kesa.[23] Conversely, there were several cases in which kesa was used to position Master Huineng as the sixth founder.

Until the Heian era, kesa were made from a single type of fabric without any patterns. Through ritsu-e, the existence of funzō-e has also been confirmed. From the Kamakura period onward, most examples of kesa are robes for Zen Buddhism, while many of the designs are based on Chinese aesthetics. This period was known as a time when

[23] Yamakawa, Aki. 2010. *Kosō to Kesa* [High Priests and Kesa: Conveying the Heart and Connecting the Mind]. Kyoto National Museum. pp. 11-14.

studying abroad on the continent was considered important, and this became evident in kesa itself. For example, in kujo-kesa of the Zen sect has a trapezoidal shape, with a triangular piece of fabric inserted near the center. Once worn, it hangs loose and spreads out slightly wide. So that kesa would not come apart, there were also *kan* (環), circular rings made out of ivory or *bekkō* (鼈甲) "tortoiseshell" to fasten ropes to tie around the body. Designs incorporated patterns such as the persimmon stems or flowering branches, corresponding to trends in secular dyeing and weaving.

Eventually, designs that were more typically Japanese began to appear. These included wisteria flower tassels and paulownia, bamboo, phoenix, and qilin. However, these suggest that there were also monks such as Messhu Soukou who had not had the experience of studying abroad.[24] The styles of trends invariably keep changing. For kesa, while there were not great changes in the way to dress, from a design aspect it became a fashion phenomenon reflecting the different trends and tastes of the times.

Dogen Zenji, who lived in the Kamakura period, was the fifty-first generation in the lineage counting from Daruma Daishi. He took pride in the fact that Zen Buddhism is the only sect that still has the official kesa of the Buddha. He taught the importance of kesa in his writings, as a symbol of the master and disciple when they face each other and pass down the Soto teachings. This was largely due to his own experience[25]

[24] *Ibid.* pp.14-16.

[25] Mizuno, Yaoko (ed.) 1990 Dogen. *Shobogenzo* (2). Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten. pp. 275-276. This scene describes how, while Dogen was studying abroad, he was moved to hold up his *kesa* every morning and read poetry.

of training under Zen Master Nyojo (如浄), a Soto Zen monk in China. Before the spiritual importance of kesa could be discussed, the world of Japanese Buddhism had to wait for the influential Dogen Zenji to arrive.

## Conclusion: Words and Hearts

### The Poetry of Clothes

For both language and clothing, the Japanese phrasing uses the same term *mini-tsukeru* "wearing on the body". The kesa is a garment that uses the body as a medium to express the heart of the Buddha and teachings of the Dharma which cannot be seen with the eye. As you repeatedly wear the clothes on your bodies, you can shed your attachments as human beings, become Buddhas, and live in the guise of that spirit.

It was during the Southern Song dynasty, when he was practicing under Zen Master Nyojo, that Zen Master Dogen witnessed the importance of kesa in Buddhist practice. At the beginning of the day, at the sounding of the board signaling the end of zazen, there is a ritual in which the wrappings of kesa are opened and placed over the head, and then the hands are joined in reverence and a poem is chanted. The most important part of the poem is quoted below.

> Whilst I was in Sung China doing my training on the long bench in the
>
> Meditation Hall, I noticed that every morning following the striking of the wake-up
>
> block, the monks who sat on either side of me would raise their folded kesa in a

gesture of offering, place it atop their head, respectfully make gassho, and recite a

verse to themselves...

On the occasion when I learned of this, a feeling I had never experienced

before welled up in me. A joy filled my body to overflowing; tears of gratitude,

stealing from my eyes, rolled down my cheeks and wet the collar of my robe.

(*Shobogenzo: On the Spiritual Merits of the Kesa*, Ch. 22)[26]

It was a scene describing the tears of joy streaming down his face at the sight of the monks paying respects to kesa:

「大いなるかな解脱 服／無相福田の衣／
如来の教えを身につけたてまつり、
広く諾々の衆生を度（わた）さむ」

How great and wondrous is the robe of enlightenment,
Formless and embracing every treasure!
I wish to unfold the Buddha's Teaching
That I may help all sentient beings reach the Other Shore[27]

After repeating the poem three times, they would perform a *gasshô* (合掌) prayer, then kneel down and put on

[26] Mizuno, Yaoko (ed.) 1990 Dogen. *Shobogenzo* (2). Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten. pp. 275-276. This scene describes how, while Dogen was studying abroad, he was moved to hold up his *kesa* every morning and read poetry.
[27] Nearman, Hubert (trans). 2007. *Shobogenzo* [The Treasure House of the Eye of the True Teaching]. California: Shasta Abbey Press. pp. 966-967.

kesa. The *shujô* (衆生) refers to all living creatures, and *watasu* (度す) describes the guiding of those lost and in despair to the borders of a land of enlightenment. As it is customary to pray to things above one's head, its presence is due proper respect. To place kesa as such above one's head is a symbolic gesture to indicate the great importance of kesa. By reciting this poem, it is an act of physically experiencing the depth and heart of kesa through the rhythm of auditory sounds.

After returning home, Zen Master Dogen decided to follow the teachings of Zen Master Nyojo. Criticizing the secular Buddhism of the time, he wished to return to the original spirit of the Buddha. The key to this lay in kesa worn by the Buddhist priests.

**Kesa and Fashion**

The kesa of Dogen Zenji, the founder of the Soto Zen sect in Japan, was handed down from generation to generation by Daichi Zenji (the sixth generation) at Kofukuji Temple in Kumamoto Prefecture, and is said to have survived for more than 800 years.[28] It is made of plain-weave linen, and both the warp and weft are dark blue, almost black (See Fig. 12).[29] This is said to have been woven by the wife of Shorenbo of Yamashiro, using hemp fiber that they had grown themselves, and presented to Dogen Zenji at Eiheiji Temple in Esshu. It is

[28] At present, it has been entrusted to the Kumamoto Prefectural Museum of Art for preservation, along with the Sodensho. Kawaguchi, Kofu. March 2014. Dogen Zenji no Kofuku-ji zō 'Nijugo-jo robe' ni tsuite (1), *Sansho, No. 846*. pp.15-18.

[29] I went to the Kumamoto Prefectural Museum of Art, where I was affiliated, and checked the actual product. The catalog says the color of the thread is "black". Yamakawa, Aki. 2010. *Kosō to Kesa* [High Priests and Kesa: Conveying the Heart and Connecting the Mind]. Kyoto National Museum. pp. 84-85.

said that Zen Master Dogen himself sewed the robe and wore it for the rest of his life.[30] It is a 25-jō kesa, sōgyari, which is classified as jōbon, and was first handed down to his disciple Kaisho as a sign of inheritance.


Fig. 12. Zen Master Dogen's Kesa, belonging to Kumamoto Prefectural Museum (from the catalog of the special exhibition by Kyoto National Museum)

[30] "In August, after purifying themselves and visiting the Buddhist altar, the two set to work. They harvested the hemp they had carefully cultivated, peeled it, soaked it in water, beat it, and extracted the fibers, and between the two of them they set to work spinning it into thread. Early one morning in mid-November, Shizuka went down to the Uji River to cleanse herself. When she returned home, she lit a lamp at her Buddhist altar and chanted the Heart Sutra (般若心経, *Hanyashingyo*). Today, the work of weaving the cloth would begin. After purifying the loom with sake and salt, she took out from the bottom of a long chest a special kind of incense that had been given to her by the Kujo family, and burned it in the room where the loom was located. Shizuka stayed there and began to weave with single-minded devotion." Otani, Tetsuo.2001. *Eihei no Kaze* [The Winds of Eihei]. Tokyo: Bungeisha. pp. 398-403.

Kesa is nyohō-e (如法衣). The inheritance of the Buddhism's *Shoden* (transmission) is symbolized by the passing down of the Shoden clothing. It is a cloth that expresses the sanctity and the authoritativeness of a Buddhist priest. Now, since kesa is a religious garment, the question arises as to whether or not it would naturally indicate an element of power. However, Dogen Zenji said, "If you are to be a child of the Buddha, you should not be a human being above the heavens, a king or a hundred officials, you should not be a layman or ordained, you should not be a servant or a maidservant, you should receive the precepts of the Buddha, and you should receive kesa."[31] Buddhism is about awakening to one's true self, and if one sincerely strives to achieve this, one can wear the Buddha's kesa regardless of one's status, whether one is high or low, and whether one is a man or woman living in a Buddhist house, he explains. This is based on the Buddha's strong advocacy of equality within India's strict caste system.

Starting from the fundamental reason of protecting the body, people started to wear clothing that carries the role of a uniform that represents nation, ethnicity, religion, class, and occupation. In addition, as society developed, there was no escaping the phenomenon of fashion trends. As such, excessive meanings were attached to cloth objects, so to speak. In the world of fashion, where newness is an absolute value, the value of inherited clothing is neglected. The traditional structures, decoration, and ways of wearing ethnic clothing are treated as relics of the past, or they become a shell of their original

[31] Mizuno, Yaoko (ed.) 1990. Dogen. *Shobogenzo* (2). Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten. pp. 270.

meaning as they become fetishized, or undergo phenomena of playing with symbols such as through “cosplay”.

During the political unrest of the Kamakura period, the people sought a new kind of Buddhism as they gradually became secularized. The Buddhist world became involved in a bloody political struggle. What Dogen Zenji adhered to was the stance of a pure Buddhist inherited from Shakamuni, Daruma Daishi, and Old Master Nyojyo - namely, to observe and hand down the pure and strict orthodox Buddhist Dharma as the basis of Buddhism. If Zen Master Dogen was obsessed with kesa, the reason for his obsession was the philosophy behind the religious robe and the Buddha Dharma itself.

Clothing is a means of expressing oneself, as well as to represent belonging to a community. In the modern age, people may take off and put on various identities, just as they dress and undress with their clothing. Is it even possible to talk solely about clothing and strip away the information of fashion? In this way kesa is a powerful presence. It is a garment that is carefully sewn with the hands and the heart, as if to weave one’s faith and sincere thoughts into the cloth. These thoughts and the wearer’s way of life are then passed on. These are clothes that are handed down with great respect. They are clothes that are accepted as part of one’s purpose in life. One might say that the Shoden Buddhist kesa would be nothing more than a piece of cloth without the existence of the teachings of the Shodensho.[32]

[32] When I visited the Kumamoto Prefectural Museum of Art, which owns and manages Dogen Zenji's *kesa* exhibited at the Kyoto National Museum, I received a valuable lesson from the museum's curator that the emphasis was not on the authenticity of the object, but rather on the Book of Succession (嗣法書).

Kesa is a transcendent clothing. It goes beyond the dichotomous values that define people, such as clean/dirty, good/bad, new/old, and so on. It is free from the system of modern fashion's dizzyingly fast-paced consumption. It has the potential to bring depth to answering the question, "What do we wear, and what are we wearing through our clothes?" It can shed new light on fashion research.

**Afterword - The Beginning of a Small Pilgrimage**

As a fashion researcher, I was asked to present the results of my basic research on kesa, which had been based in Kobe. It was my first time presenting my findings in English. Before it became my research subject, I had owned a book on the study of kesa which sat quietly on my shelf for a long time. Though I had bought the book quite a long time ago without opening its pages, when I finally opened the book, I pored over it and tried copying what I saw, starting with sewing small kesa of my own. The design of the first piece clearly showed the patchwork structure, and I had no intention of wearing it at the temple. But when I met Old Master Hei, I learned that kesa was the heart of the Buddha, serving to pass on the Dharma itself. For the second time, relying on the help of my mother who is an expert seamstress, I sewed rakusu. By pure coincidence, it was made of linen in the same dark blue color as Dogen Zenji's kesa, which was exhibited in Kyoto and now rests in Kumamoto.

The monthly study at Master Hei's zazenkai was always a priority for me. Except for when I was studying abroad, I rarely miss a session. While I was a visiting researcher for a year at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, there

happened to be a special exhibition from the National Museum of Kyoto. Titled “High Priests and Kesa”, it displayed authentic robes of *o-kesa*. Unfortunately, I was unable to view the exhibition, but at the time I was doing research on the reception of Japanese costume culture in Britain. At the site of my research, The V&A Museum, I went to gaze almost every day at the glittering o-kesa (See Fig. 13) on display in the Japanese wing. Each time I would leave Japan, I was drawn back to Buddhism and zazen, an experience I kept repeating. Now, it is kesa that provides that connection for me.

Fig. 13. Kesa exhibit held at Toshiba Gallery at The Victoria and Albert Museum
(photographed by the author, 2010)

To backtrack slightly, while zazen may be the only thing I am serious about continuing on a daily basis, sitting at Myokoji may appear to be the same as practicing zazen every day at home. Nevertheless, there are some large differences in why this time is uniquely special. If there are times I am sleepy, or unable to concentrate, being surrounded by quiet mountains and sitting with the Master and other participants at the temple can evoke deep emotions and sometimes move me to tears. I feel happy to be alive in the here and now. The "Zen wo Kiku Kai" ["Listen to Zen"] (currently held only in Osaka in the Kansai area) is free of charge, and the "Shu-rei Zen", the annual autumn *sesshin* at Koshoji Temple in Kyoto, is almost free of charge, only with necessary fee for meals for two days and one night. In a world where everything can be bought with money, kesa are sold as vestments at Buddhist altar stores in Japan. However, if I were to buy kesa, would it be easy to put on? Of course, I do not mean whether I can technically wear it.

When I showed Hei-Roshi the navy blue rakusu that I had made together with my mother, I was also writing my thesis on kesa. During this time, I was given a piece of Old Master Hei's rakusu for research purposes. I was grateful for the fact that it had a well-worn appearance and was a muddy yellow or rcolor called *mokuran* (orchid)-*iro*, which does not illustrate exactly a specific color, but rather is made from mixing various different colors. From Kobe, I occasionally traveled to Kyoto and Kumamoto, but in 2017, I decided to go out in the world and fly to France to investigate the succession of kesa culture. The largest ascetic training center

in Europe was located in a vast site in Blois on the banks of the Loire River, inside a château (French castle). Named “La Gendronnière” (禅道尼苑), the temple was built by Master Deshimaru Taisen, a disciple of Master Sawaki Kodo. There I had the opportunity to learn about the actual practice of kesa from a French nun. I wore the navy-blue robe I had sewn with my mother and brought with me from Kobe. It was my first time wearing it in public while practicing zazen. I carried the gift from Old Master Hei with me as a precious talisman and kept it on my person the entire time.

I eventually returned to Kobe from France. A friend of mine who is a foreign nun informed me that a *kesa-sesshin* was being held at Tousho-ji Temple in Okayama, a Soto Zen temple that accepts many monks and nuns from abroad. I was fortunate enough to be led there. In my friends' home country, there were no well-stocked Buddhist altar stores. They had to sew their own robes. I can imagine that it was not uncommon for the Buddhist priests to have their own needle and thread in the past in Japan as well. The navy blue linen kesa mentioned earlier is said to have been made by Dogen Zenji himself. A bond (縁, *en*) formed between two people is like an unbreakable thread. Although Okayama Prefecture is located next to Hyogo Prefecture, where I live, in the Chugoku region beyond the Kansai region, the head priest of Tousho-ji Temple, who is the director of the Kyoka Center of the Chugoku Region, was well acquainted with Old Master Hei, who was engaged in the same work in the Kinki region.

As more and more of my monk and nun friends were going to Okayama from Blois, they stayed at my apartment in

Kobe on their way to and from work. We once shared the nervous situation in which my Romanian nun friend was tasked with carrying the precious o-kesa sewn by a German nun, and had to stop by Kobe on her way to Okayama. Now with the current pandemic, it is unclear when we can meet again. We had sat together in this apartment, as they showed me their hand-sewn kesa, and we spoke in English, a foreign language for each of us. I have a partially sewn piece of black French cotton cloth with white thread which I am sewing into rakusu. I don't know when I will be able to return and continue the work. I was able to experience workshops with foreign priests once I had left Kansai. My small kesa pilgrimage continues overseas to Blois, France, and then to Okayama in the neighboring Chugoku region. If and when circumstances allow, I would like to write about my experiences of zen-sesshin retreats at various temples, perhaps as a practicum in continuation of this introductory article.

Now it is prohibited to cross prefectural borders, so I am in Hyogo Prefecture. As I stay home in Kobe, I organize and collect my research, writing these thoughts. For me, this journey is just beginning. I have still never worn a large-size o-kesa. I do not know when that time may come. But with my own hand, stitch by stitch I sew with my heart feeling full, hoping for the day when I may be able to wear this cloth.

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# Hair: Myth, Meaning and Ritual Practices in Contemporary Japan

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## 1. Introduction

"So he told her everything. […] 'If my head were shaved, my strength would leave me, and I would become as weak as any other man.' […] After putting him to sleep on her lap, she called for someone to shave off the seven braids of his hair, and so began to subdue him. And his strength left him." (*Old Testament*: Judges: 16)

The legend of Samson and Delilah is one of the most famous in the history of humanity: a story of love and betrayal, of masculinity and strength, all under the looming presence of a vengeful God. The concept of hair as a vessel for power (both human and divine) often appears in mythology and folklore, one of the newer and more popular renditions being the tale of Rapunzel and her never-cut, magical hair. In her extensive work on body in the world cultures, Victoria Pitts-Taylor succinctly defines the emphasis humans have placed on this natural adornment since pre-historical times:

"Human hair distributions have been consistent since the Upper Paleolithic period, despite the fact that a key symbol of prehistoric humans is a mane of wild, unkempt hair. Thus, unkempt hair has come to stand for untamed sexuality, a lack of civilization, language, and morality. Archaeological evidence, however, suggests that humans have altered their hair since the time of the caveman. Hair regenerates itself when disease or old age is not present and survives the body post mortem. During the Victorian era, the hair of deceased loved ones was made into art objects such as pictures and jewelry. Friends and lovers also gifted their hair to each other to express affection." (Pitts-Taylor vol.1: 247)


Victorian brooch with a lock of blond hair (personal collection)

The role and significance of hair in Japanese culture have been analyzed by Gary Ebersole in his *"Long Black Hair Like a Seat Cushion": Hair Symbolism in Popular Japanese Religion*, an article rich in examples of the meaning of hair in Japanese folk beliefs and popular religion (Hiltebeitel & Miller 1998). The present paper is a similar attempt at looking into hair as it appears in myths, legends, and ritual practices - an analysis by no means exhaustive, but which will discuss the way ancient beliefs and archetypes have been perpetuated into contemporary times.

## 2. The Age of Gods

Perhaps one of the most common images that comes to a researcher's mind when talking about disheveled hair is that of the storm god Susano-wo-no-mikoto, who, according to the oldest chronicle of Japan, *Kojiki* (712), refused to go and govern the realm given to him by his father Izanagi, and wept until "his eight-grasp beard reached the pit of his stomach" (Chamberlain 1981: 51). Although the only element present here is a long beard (which is frequently used as a sign of warrior-type masculinity in Japanese art), Susano-wo often appears with long, unruly hair in later depictions.[1] This is by no means a coincidence, as he is a multifaceted figure in the Japanese Pantheon: a god of death, destruction and chaos (Tamas 2008: 142, Saigô 1975: 241), a god of storm "continually weeping, wailing, and fuming with rage" (Aston 1905: 137), or a shaman performing a fertility ritual (Tamas 2008: 145).

This relationship between the representations of a god and ritual practices is relevant for this analysis, as it demonstrates how in ancient times, the hair attribute most deserving to be recorded in a myth (myths being the sacred history which preserves no irrelevant details) is that associated with magic and the transformations it involves. In the oldest Japanese chronicles, *Kojiki* (712) and *Nihonshoki* (720), it is not a long, beautiful Rapunzel-like hair that first appears on the mythical stage, but the unruly hair that seems to have a life of its own of a male deity. In a manner similar to

[1] The Japanese indigenous system of beliefs did not originally include religious imagery, such sculptures or paintings being created after the introduction of Buddhism, and initially in association with it. Some of the more popular images date from the 19th century-*ukiyo-e* depicting Susano-wo slaying the dragon.

Samson's story, Susano-wo's punishment for his rampage into Amaterasu's (his sister and the Sun Goddess) realm is the cutting of his nails and beard (*Kojiki* 2003: 67) - a symbolic gesture that deprives him of the power associated with being a god of the higher realm, Takamagahara.

However, this is not the first episode that mentions hair in Japanese mythology. According to the chronicles, after the Japanese archipelago and the myriad gods were created through the union of Izanagi and Izanami ("world parents"), Izanami dies giving birth to the fire god. Izanagi follows her to the Other World (Yomi-no-Kuni) in an attempt to bring her back, but fails and is chased by some Other World fearsome creatures - the Japanese version of the harpies or furies. What follows is a common theme in the folktales of the world: the hero is chased by a witch (in most cases) or an ogre, and throws back various objects, in an effort to stop or at least slow down his opponent. The objects thrown all have symbolic value, but an omnipresent one is the comb. Izanagi too throws back a comb, which turns into bamboo shoots; the harpies stop to eat them and he gains some distance.[2] It is impossible not to notice the fact that the comb has an intrinsic connection to hair - it is the closest item to a part of the body, a "symbol of renewal and regeneration - even of life itself" (Sherrow 2006: xxi). It was also a comb that caused Izanagi's failure to bring Izanami back: he broke and lit the tooth of a comb in order to look around, and saw Izanami's decomposing body, and it is a comb that Susano-wo changes Kushinada-hime into, in order

[2] "he took and broke the multitudinous and close-toothed comb in the right bunch [of his hair] and cast it down, and it instantly turned into bamboo sprouts. While she pulled them up and ate them, he fled on." (Chamberlain 39)

to protect her from being devoured by a dragon. Chamberlain makes the following remarks on the word *kushi* ("comb") appearing in the princess's name: "there is a play on word in connection with the incident of her transformation into a comb which is mentioned immediately below, though most authorities agree in considering 櫛 to be here used phonetically for 奇[3]" (1981: 73).

As Ebersole notices, there is a "symbolic complex linking a comb, bamboo, and rejuvenating power," as demonstrated by

> "the myth of how a *kami* was given a heavenly jeweled comb (*ama no tamagushi*)[4] and sent down from the High Heavens to serve the Emperor a mixture of heavenly and earthly water in order to guarantee his longevity. The instructions he received from the myriad heavenly *kami* read in part: 'Stand this jeweled comb up, and from the time that the waning sun goes down until the morning sun shines recite the heavenly ritual, the solemn ritual words. If you thus recite, as a sign, sacred manifold bamboo shoots will sprout forth like young water plants, and from underneath many heavenly springs will gush forth." (Ebersole 1998: 92, Philippi 1990: 77)

[3] 奇, meaning "strange", can also be read *kushi*, just like the character 櫛 for comb.
[4] The play on words is again apparent, the word *kushi* being written 櫛 for comb and 串 for skewer, while *tamagushi* 玉串 is an "object presented to the kami by a priest or worshiper, composed of a sprig of evergreen *sakaki* to which paper streamers (*shide*), or paper mulberry fibers (*yū*) have been attached." (Encyclopedia of Shinto, http://k-amc.kokugakuin.ac.jp/DM/dbSearchList.do?class_name=col_eos&search_condition_type=1&db_search_condition_type=0&View=0&focus_type=0&startNo=1&searchFreeword=tamagushi&searchRangeType=0, accessed on October 13, 2020).

In the prayer quoted above, the comb is an object from heaven, while in Izanagi's myth it is "sacred" - both instances suggesting that something of the spirit of the god has been transferred onto the object that had come into such close connection with the hair. Since hair is an element often used in magical practices, it comes as no surprise that some of its power is transferred onto combs, as noted by James Frazer in relation to the Maori taboo of having the comb of a "sacred person" come into contact with a place where food has been cooked (Frazer 1976: 256). Izanagi himself can be seen as the deified image of an ancient shaman, who, after having completed the initiation journey to the Other World, is able to perform magical feats using the objects closest to the source of his power - hair.

Comb and hair ornament, late 19th century


Comb amulet from Kushida Shrine[5]

(personal collection)

The comb is not the only magical hair ornament. During the Other World voyage, Izanagi also throws back a black *mi-*

[5] 櫛田神社。A shrine in Fukuoka City, and one of the places that worship Susano-wo.

*kazura* 御縵, which turns into grapes. The word *kazura* can indicate either a type of vine, or some kind of head cover; Chamberlain translates it as "head-dress", adding the following comment: "We might perhaps with equal propriety render by 'wreath' the word here translated head-dress - leaves and flowers having been the earliest ornaments for the hair. In later time, however, it has been used to designate any sort of head-dress, and that is also the dictionary meaning of the Chinese character with which it is written. The Japanese word for 'head-dress' and 'creeper' are homonymous, and indeed the former is probably but a specialized acceptation of the latter"[6] (1982: 42-43).

We have already indicated that the motif of the hero who throws back various objects in order to slow down the evil creatures chasing him is a universal theme; however, Japan appears to be a singular case in that two of the (usual) three objects are related to hair. In Eastern European versions of the tale, the hero throws a comb which turns into a thick forest (another suggestion of the life power imbued in a decorative object), a mirror that turns into a frozen lake, and a piece of soap that becomes a slippery road. In the Japanese myth, Izanagi is the deity of life - after his escape from the Other World, he will oppose Izanami, who vows to kill one thousand people every day, by saying that he will make one thousand five hundred people be born every day - and as such his power as god of creation is transferred into

[6] In his 2014 translation, Gustav Heldt chooses to mix the two meanings of the word in "dark vine binding his mighty hair," without adding further comments. (Ō, Yasumaro; Ō, no Yasumaro. The Kojiki (Translations from the Asian Classics). Columbia University Press. Kindle Edition.)

the accessories that were in close contact with his hair, and manages to gain time against the advance of death.

Hair is also a powerful symbol in the episode where Amaterasu confronts Susano-wo, and they create children using an object belonging to their opponent. Amaterasu prepares for battle by unbinding her hair and re-tying it into a *mizura* style - a style characteristic to men which involved parting the hair in the middle and tying it into two bunches above the ears. Since Amaterasu and Susano-wo do not actually fight each other (conflicts in Japanese myths seem to be settled mostly through symbolic contests and ritual gestures), it is obvious that her actions have a deeper meaning: she is a shamaness preparing to perform a ritual, an interpretation supported by the fact that she adorns her hair with the special *magatama* jewels. Susano-wo uses these jewels to create children: he asks Amaterasu to give them to him, he chews them and spits out five new deities. As William Doty states, the "myth may explain the underlying perspective or general orientation of the ritual - and not necessarily in a 'realistic' manner,"[7] which means that we cannot expect to find a one-on-one parity between myth and actual ritual practices in ancient Japan. Nevertheless, the episodes mentioned here clearly include ritual elements, most likely involving shamans who used special hairstyles and

[7] "For example, the Greek stories about Prometheus determining which parts of the sacrificial animal should be presented to the gods (and getting tricked in turn: the gods get the ephemeral aroma and smoke-parts corresponding to immortality-the humans merely the meat, the mortal, corruptible part); or the child-god Hermes setting out a sacrifice for the twelve Olympians, among whom he cleverly includes himself: these reflect many actual details of Greek ritual sacrifice practice, but neither account simply mirrors any specific sacrifice."

ornaments when performing ceremonies, the magical role of hair being of the utmost importance, either as an indicator of special status and power, or as a ritual implement.

Mask representing the dragon-slaying Susano-wo made in the Kobayashi Workshop, Shimane (author's collection)

As a counter-example, the lack of hair is something can prevent a person from performing a ritual, as stated in the following passage from *Nihoshoki*: in his sixth year on the throne (BC 92), Emperor Mimaki-iri-biko-i-niye "entrusted Yamato-oho-kuni-dama no Kami to Nunaki-iri-bime no Mikoto to be worshipped. But Nunaki-iri-bime no Mikoto was bald and lean, and therefore unfit to perform the rites of worship." (Nihonshoki 1 2006: 270-271, translation - Aston 1998: 152) Despite his habit of accompanying the translation with detailed notes related to the meaning of word, as well as historical and social aspects, Aston does not leave any upon

Nunaki-iri-bime's baldness, while the Japanese editors only mention that he was in poor health, and as such unable to perform the necessary rituals (Tamas 2020: 201). James Frazer (1977: 3), quoting Kaempfer's "History of Japan", refers to the custom of not cutting the Emperor's hair - an indication of the Emperor's sacred nature, and, we might add, an attempt not to diminish the intrinsic power of his spirit.

In his analysis, Gary Ebersole focuses on a perspective of hair as being similar to sexuality: "Both sexuality and hair are in one sense 'natural' - that is, they are simply givens, a part of the human condition. Yet, once each of these is understood to be a site or source of power, it becomes something that needs to be treated with care" (1998: 78). He then continues to discuss the symbolism of hair from the perspective of its connection to sexuality - a valid point of view for which he brings sufficient convincing arguments. Our analysis goes into a different direction: hair, a natural part of the body and a magical object at the same time, appears in myths, legends, folktales, every time as clue for some ritual practice (sometimes forgotten), and still plays an important role in performances that continue until the present day. Many aspects of contemporary rituals are faithful renditions of classical myths and legends, and, while it is a matter of fact that ritual changes over time, the fact that human agents throughout the ages found it necessary to return to and re-enact the original story is highly relevant when it comes to the significance of hair in both sacred and social ritual.

## 3. Ghosts and supernatural creatures

A review of myths, legends, and practices related to hair by historical period would be a monumental enterprise - something to be considered for a future project. Nevertheless, we believe that we can shed some light on the significance of hair in Japanese sacred and "real" history by looking into ancient, medieval and pre-modern imagery, which has been quite accurately transferred into modern and contemporary times.

On October 13, 2020, a *rakugo* artist (Shôfukutei Junpei) started his performance[8] by mentioning how he had met a beautiful young woman during a show fifteen years before - a woman dressed in blue, with flowing black hair. The woman addressed him after the show, and promised to attend all his performances if he included episodes about Nara, at which, charmed, he promised her to create one hundred new stories. The story he told on October 13 was the fiftieth, but the woman had never made another appearance - which led him to believe that she may have been the ghost of one of the Buddhist monks who had founded the Omizutori[9] ceremony from Todaiji Temple in Nara. The story may have been a skillful introduction to a *kaidan* ("ghost stories") performance, but the emphasis he placed on the woman's black hair is of the highest importance. *Yûrei*, the Japanese ghosts, are traditionally depicted with "wild black hair, hanging white

[8] *Rakugo Omoshiro Kaidan Tokushû*, October 13, 2020, Hanjōtei, Osaka.

[9] "The Omizutori ritual is famed for signaling the advent of spring, but the ceremony is actually called Shuni-e, which is a ritual of repentance performed before the Jūichimen Kannon statue of the Nigatsudō Hall at Tōdaiji temple." (https://www.narahaku.go.jp/english/exhibition/2014toku/omizutori/2014omizutori.html, accessed on October 13, 2020).

robes, and exaggerated facial features" (Davisson 2015: 20). The image was made popular in the 18th century by the painter Maruyama Ôkyo (1733~1795), who seemingly painted his dead lover as she had appeared to him in a dream.

Maruyama is not the only one to have thus represented ghosts in his art. Paintings by Iijima Kôga (1829~1900) or Shibata Zenshin (1807~1891) display similar characteristics: slender figures with long, flowing, unkempt hair. While both Iijima and Shibata paint figures that are more grotesque than Maruyama's, they all have similarly disheveled hair - a feature that makes them stand out as beings of the Other World, in opposition to living human beings, who arrange their hair as society dictates. Hair and hairstyling have been always used to indicate religious beliefs, identity, social membership, or socioeconomic status (Sherrow 2006), and at the same time society has imposed rules regarding acceptable or forbidden hairstyles. For example, it was only during the Meiji period (1871, to be more exact) that the government allowed men to choose their own hairstyle, but the women were not yet allowed to do so. A document recently discovered in Chiba Prefecture is believed to be the copy of a report from 1876, by which a woman notifies the authorities that she had had her hair cut. "In the paper dated Oct. 25, 1876, the woman's father-in-law and other relatives reported that she had her hair cut in July as part of a religious ritual to pray that she would recover from a lengthy illness." (Mikuni 2020)

While women make up the vast majority of ghost figures painted in the 19th century in Japan, there are also male figures, such as the depiction of the ghost of Kohata Koheiji,

a popular kabuki character who appears next to his killer(s). In an 1830 painting by Utagawa Toyokuni II, Koheiji, emaciated, with long hair hanging loose over his shoulders, appears next to the image of a samurai properly displaying the society-prescribed top-knot. Kohata Koheiji appears quite often in works from the Utagawa school, either with a disheveled hair and bloody forehead (as in paintings from 1853 by Utagawa Kunisada), or as an almost decayed skull, with only a few hairs left (as in a painting from 1831 by Hokusai). Just as the women with the flowing hair are contrasted with their living counterparts, whose complex hairstyle was often a burden (according to Mikuni,[10] "it reportedly required half a day for women to complete washing their hair because the chignon was firmly constructed using a large amount of oil. Many women at the time were lucky if they could wash their hair once a month, even in summer. As a result, it was not uncommon for them to develop headaches due to the foul smell of their hair."), Koheiji is the prototype of the male ghost, whose hair loss also suggest the loss of life force and ability to live within a human group.

Adhering to the accepted norms is what makes an individual a member of a community, but ghosts no longer have to follow rules, and they no longer belong to the human world - a status clearly indicated by their hair in a "natural" state, untouched by fashion or societal constraints. This feature also helps identify them as non-human, and as such frightening and potentially dangerous.

[10] http://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/13605601?fbclid=IwAR0ciUKuGAxTjKH7H6g8JV_8Ta0FAnt3aMMx9yoOjJdyxyZ4hTF7tDcHJa4 (Accessed on October 10, 2020).

Japanese gods, on the other hand, are represented today in mythological re-enactments called *kagura,*[11] sacred dances, where men put on masks to become mortal embodiments of the deities, most of which have wild, long hair - just as with *yûrei*, hair is the physical characteristic that separates them from humanity, but in contrast with the ghosts' lifeless hair, the hair of the descending gods is a locus of power and vitality.

Ame-no-tajikarao-no Kami (the deity who sealed the cave where Amaterasu had been hiding, after having pulled her out, thus bringing back the sun into the world)[12]. Takachiho Kagura, January 2016

[11] "A ritual performance made as an offering to the *kami*. Most are performed only once a year or once every few years. The kami are invited to occupy the sacred area and worshiped with performances of music, song, and dance." (Encyclopedia of Shinto, http://k-amc.kokugakuin.ac.jp/DM/detail.do?class_name= col_eos&data_id =23222, accessed on October 9, 2020).

[12] "Susanoo went on a rampage, causing Amaterasu to hide away in the Rock Cave and throwing the Plain of High Heaven into darkness and chaos. In response, the kami Takamimusuhi called a meeting of the other heavenly kami to discuss how to lure Amaterasu from the cave, and it was decided to present a program of festival worship and votive entertainment. Lured by the excitement outside, Amaterasu came out of her cave, returning light to the world once again. The cave was then sealed to prevent her from returning inside." (Encyclopedia of Shinto, http://k-amc.kokugakuin.ac.jp/DM/dbSearchList.do?class_name=col_eos&search_condition_type=1&db_search_condition_type=0&View=0&focus_type=0&startNo=1&searchFreeword=amaterasu&searchRangeType=0, accessed on October 9, 2020).

Similar canons apply to the depictions of *yôkai*, supernatural creatures that live in the same realm as humans, but who appear at specific times in specific places - they are beings born out of "man's fear of nature and anxieties" (Koichi 2016: 2). Many *yôkai* do not have hair at all (the lack of hair is also significant, baldness having been traditionally seen as a marker of evil, and an indicator of exclusion from society - Tamas 2020), and the hair of those who do is also "wild", either long and unkempt, or short and sparse. The creatures that appear in the *Night Parade of One Hundred Demons Picture Scroll* (Edo period) have either the eerily flowing hair of *yûrei*, or peculiar hair which sticks out like a thorn bush. They sometimes have hair of different colors, for example the white hair of a *bake-neko* ("monster cat") - which is not fur, but long hair on its head, or the red hair of a *tengu*-like creature in the *Night Parade of One Hundred Demons* Scroll.

*Tengu* (powerful mountain spirits) are prominent figures in the Japanese lore, and the "more powerful *Konoha-tengu* (Tumbling-leaf tengu) have bright red human faces, long bulbous noses, wild white hair, and bulging eyes" (Ashkenazi 2003: 271). We can observe here that, while *yûrei* display distorted human features - black hair, the natural color for the Japanese, but in disarray, an indication of their separation from the human world, the *yôkai* have non-human characteristics, because they had never been human. *Yôkai* exist somewhere in between gods (*kami*), whose hair may be wild when they represent chaos or supernatural strength, but which is in general an indication of divine status and power, and humans, who must respect and even impose order in the

world, and as such their hair (as a source and symbol of vitality) must follow certain rules and restrictions.

## 4. Contemporary rituals and practices

The relationship between hairstyle and socio-economic status is a universal in world cultures, yet certain aspects seem to be more prominent in Japan. Historically speaking, "hairstyles could indicate a person's marital status, social class, age, occupation, and/or religious affiliation. For example, during the Meiji period, unmarried women wore a butterfly hairstyle that they would change after marriage to a different type of bun…. Members of the lower classes (*hinin*) had short haircuts rather than the long, carefully tended hair worn by upper-class Japanese. […] A traditional punishment for women who committed crimes was to have their head shaved off" (Sherrow 2006: 220). It is worth briefly mentioning here that what used to be an imposed punishment turned into a self-inflicted form of contrition in Japanese society, when a member of the popular group AKB48 shaved her head as an apology to her fans, after it was revealed that she was involved in a romantic relationship.

In contemporary society there are several categories of hairstyles associated with professions, and they all possess ritual connotations: the top-knot of sumo wrestlers, the elaborate chignons of maiko (apprentice geishas), the subdued ponytail of *miko* ("shrine maidens"), and the shaved heads of Buddhist priests (no longer compulsory, but often encountered, particularly on special occasions).

We mentioned that during the Meiji period men were allowed to choose their hairstyle, but later during the same

period the top-knot was actually forbidden, being seen as a relic of the old times. However, sumo wrestlers were allowed to keep this hairstyle, which was seen as deeply connected to tradition and to sumo's roots as a ritual of fertility and offering to the gods (Tanaka 2016: 210-211). According to Chomnard (2019: 150), "the topknot is a symbol of the professional sumo wrestlers, and is seen as part of their bodies, which is why grabbing an opponent's hair is considered foul and leads to losing the match. Moreover, this topknot has a particularly strong meaning for the wrestlers themselves, and the loss of hair leading to the impossibility of tying up a topknot is seen as the end of a wrestler's career."

The intricate hairstyles of the maiko are well-known: heavy-looking constructions that required hours of effort on the part of specialized hairdressers, and which take a heavy toll on the bearer by leaving a bald spot on the top of the head. During a 2019 interview, Ms. Ichi Sayo, a geisha from the Pontochô district in Kyoto, revealed that this bald spot, although requiring skill to hide it when sporting simpler hairstyles, it is also a matter of pride for the geishas, as it shows that they successfully "graduated" from their apprenticeship period. This particular up-do is connected to a ritual practice - the Kushi (Comb) Matsuri,[13] performed on the fourth Monday of September at Yasui Konpiragû Shrine in Kyoto. A fairly new celebration, Kushi Matsuri began in 1961, when the Beautician Association from Higashi Yama (Kyoto)

[13] "According to the Grand Dictionary of Japanese Folklore (*Nihon Minzoku Dajiten*), a matsuri represents the time when the divine spirits are welcome among mortals, 'receiving offerings and being properly entertained with artistic performances and feasts, so that they would be pacified'" (Tamas 2018: 17).

thought that it would be a sad thing to simply throw away broken combs, so they paid for the erection of a comb-mound within the precincts of the shrine, and for special religious services to express gratitude for combs long-used, but no longer useful (Tanaka 2016: 64-65). The concept of organizing rituals to send off objects that have been useful for an extended period of time is not new, the celebrated items ranging from dolls to needles or pencils. According to the shrine website, the ceremony is organized to discard with respect and gratitude the combs which "enhance the beauty of a woman's hair"[14] - although there is no magical or supernatural aspect here, the comb, as in the first part of this paper, appears as an object of value, intrinsically connected to hair as a source of life and beauty.

Two aspects related to this relatively new practice require further analysis here. The first is the apparent lack of ritual customs or superstitions related to hair in the *geiko*/ maiko world. As part of a different project we have been doing intensive research in Pontochô for over a year, but managed to obtain surprisingly few answers to our questions related to hair. The geishas are, of course, proud of their signature hairstyle, and, as mentioned above, even of the bald spot which is worn as a badge of honor, yet they were not able to offer more relevant details. Ms. Miyako of the Etô tea house mentioned that when she was young, on one's last day as a maiko (apprentice geisha, or *geiko* - the word commonly used in Kyoto), they were supposed to allow the man who had their heart to cut the front lock of their hair. The gesture may have

[14] http://www.yasui-konpiragu.or.jp/event/ (Accessed on October 10, 2020).

had more symbolic value if Ms. Miyako had not seemed quite amused as she remembered that she had repeated the process several times, for different customers. This anecdote connected with the fact that no other significant practices related to hair were discussed indicates that hair may have lost some of its symbolic power and allure in the geisha world.

Kushi Matsuri was established at the suggestion of a hairdresser, Ms. Minami Chie, the owner of one of the many beauty parlors in the Gion area, who wanted a ceremony to be hold for the old combs that had preserved the Japanese hairstyle. According to Mr. Hajime Torii, the *gûji* (head priest) of Yasui Konpiragû, the *kushi-zuka* (the mound where the combs are buried) was erected in the second year of the ceremony, under the guidance of his father. *Geiko* and maiko do attend the ceremony but only as performers of sacred entertainment, the procession of historical hairstyles and the congregation being made up of regular people.

Shinto ritual performed at Kushi Matsuri
(photos courtesy of Yasui Konpiragû Shrine)


The historical parade at Kushi Matsuri
(photo courtesy of Yasui Konpiragû Shrine)


*Ema* (wooden prayer tablet) from Yasui Konpiragû Shrine, with the image of a geiko wig, and the words Kushi Matsuri and "prayer for beauty" written on it

Central Kyoto, with its famous entertainment districts and myriad temples and shrines, is a place where hair indicates professional affiliation, and, in the case of the geisha, is closely associated with the main source of income. A geisha is defined by her special hairstyle - be it natural hair or a wig, yet it is those working with it that place most emphasis on its preservation. Within the precincts of Yasaka Shrine (also in Gion) there is a smaller shrine dedicated to the deities of beauty (the three goddesses created by Amaterasu from her brother Susano-wo's sword during their symbolic fight), where most of the offerings are made by beauty parlors and beauty schools. Hair and its styling represent a way to make a living both for entertainers and hairdressers, but it seems that the beauticians are more invested in obtaining divine protection - a fact that may be connected to the fact that for hairdressers,

hair is the only path to economic stability, while entertainers such as the geisha have an array of features and skills to develop and preserve.


Utsukushi Gozensha (Yasaka Shrine, Kyoto). The red pillars are inscribed with the name of the institutions (most of them connected to the beauty industry) that donated them.

Two other professions distinguished by specific hairstyles are what Dominique Buisson calls the "servants of the gods", *miko* and Buddhist priests. The *miko* must keep their hair black (or the natural color, but black is generally assumed to be the natural color), and tied back with white and red ribbons in a style specific to the Heian period (Buisson 2001: 37).

Miko preparing for Tenjin Matsuri (July 25, 2020, Osaka Tenmangu Shrine)

Although no longer compulsory, most Buddhist priests continue to shave their heads, the meaning of this practice being that they are no longer of "this" world, the world of human passion and suffering.

> "When Shakyamuni secretly left his father's palace before his enlightenment, he ordered his attendant Channa to shave his (Shakyamuni's) head, saying he vowed to release all people from suffering. It was only when he had cut off all his hair that he set out on his journey of religious training. This is why ordained Buddhists are called 'those who have left home' (*shukke*) and why they shave their heads (*teihatsu*). Shaving the head symbolizes the abandoning of one's former self to enter Buddhism." (Matsunami 2007: 31-32)

Just like *kami*, *yûrei* and *yôkai*, Buddhist priests belong to a realm different from the daily profane world, and their life force (represented by the hair) is given away for the benefit of the others. While the head shaving of the priests is a symbolic renunciation of ordinary human life, Kunio Yanagita actually records an example of hair being offered to the deities in exchange for the fulfillment of a wish, the hair having the same value as one's body (Yanagita 1974: 216), that is, a substitute for a human sacrifice.

Another example of a hair offering would be the intricately braided and coiffed hair young women and girls display at local festivals - a modern extension of the idea that one should wear one's "Sunday best" in the presence of the gods. At Saijo Matsuri (October 14~16, Ehime Prefecture), for example, the young women who accompany the men carrying the *danjiri* ("parade floats") display at least two different elaborate hairstyles, one for each day of the festival, and local hair salons report significant profit during the period - when reservations must be made even one year in advance. Similar practices can be observed at most *matsuri* that allow the participation of young women. Hair as a symbol of life is a gift <u>from</u> the gods, and for the brief moments when the human and the divine intermingle during a festival, it also becomes a gift <u>for</u> the gods.

The phenomenon is noted by Victoria Sherrow in her "Encyclopedia of Hair": "Elaborate traditional Japanese hairstyles can still be seen during festivals and special occasions, such as New Year celebrations. A festival called Shimada-mage is held in Japan on the third Sunday in

September. Female beauticians wearing traditional hairstyles parade along streets in the downtown district of Shimada and near Uda-ji Temple. Some Japanese brides choose to wear a classic *nihongami* wig for their wedding." (2006: 225)


Festival hairstyles at Saijo Matsuri

The symbolic value and significance of hair in Japanese culture becomes apparent when considering the existence of a Shinto shrine dedicated to it (apparently the only one in Japan), Mikami[15] Shrine in Arashiyama, Kyoto. The shrine is dedicated to the God of Hair, and rituals to express gratitude towards the deity that bestowed hair upon our heads, towards beauticians and cosmetic companies, as well as towards the customers of such companies are performed periodically.[16] According to the legend told on the shrines' official website, the God of Hair is associated with a historical figure, Fujiwara Unemenosuke Masayuki, the third son of a

[15] Another obvious play on words, *kami* meaning both deity (神) and hair (髪).
[16] http://mikami-jinja.sakura.ne.jp/appreciation.html (Accessed on October 11, 2020).

Fujiwara courtier from the 13th century who had taken responsibility for some missing treasure. In order to help his father pay for the lost treasure, Masayuki worked as a hairdresser, braiding women's hair, and thus became the divine protector of those working in the same industry. The key word connected to this shrine is "gratitude": people visit to show appreciation for the hair they have been blessed with and towards the specialists who take care of it, while hairdressers express gratitude for their customers.


Mikami Shrine


Comb and scissors shaped *omamori* (amulets) sold at Mikami Shrine


*Ema* in the shape of a comb, with the image of a Heian lady with long flowing hair (Mikami Shrine)

A similar phenomenon can be observed at Izanagi Jingû Grand Shrine[17] in Awajishima on October 20, which has been designated Hair Appreciation Day (Tôhatsu Kansha Sai),[18]

[17] https://izanagi-jingu.jp/?page_id=64

[18] Tôhatsu (頭髪)-the hair on one's head- being a potential reading for October 20.

and a company specializing in hair products, Reve 21, actually installed a stela there as a gesture of gratitude. According to their press release from August 23, 2017, the stela is "an offering to the spirit of life that dwells in hair", "a prayer to kami and buddhas through hair."[19]

The Hair Appreciation Stela dedicated by Reve 21

Just like Kushi Matsuri, Tôhatsu Kansha Sai (Hair Appreciation Day) was created at the initiative of a woman not directly connected to sacred practices, Ms. Midori Tanaka, who is not a hairdresser herself, but a representative of a group of hairdressers and other women who wanted to show their gratitude and appreciation towards the only natural adornment available to humans. It has been often said that in ancient Shinto, people do not pray for something, they express their gratitude instead so that to avoid causing the wrath of deities.

[19] https://www.reve21.co.jp/files/2017/NewsRelease_20170823.pdf (Accessed on October 12).

Similarly, in the three cases of shrines that host hair-related rituals, the emphasis is placed on gratitude, not on direct prayers for more and/ or better hair (although such requests are written on the votive tablets offered by visitors). Both Mr. Hajime Torii from Yasui Konpiragû and a representative of Izanagi Jingû confirmed that they were aware of the Izanagi myths that involve more or less magical combs, but they both stated their belief that these stories are not widely known to the general public. Ms. Midori Tanaka did not refer to these myths either, focusing instead of hair as a symbol of life: "that is why women have more hair than men, because they create life." Izanagi Jingû was chosen as the locus for this particular ritual not because Izanagi used combs and hair accessories to escape from the Other World, but because he helped create the world and defeated death. Another practical reason for the choice was the intention to incorporate the new celebration in the recent *machi okoshi* (rural revitalization) projects. Izanagi Jingû is located in Awajishima, a beautiful but depopulated island in Hyogo Prefecture, and a new celebration would be a good way of attracting more tourists.

Kushi Matsuri, being performed in a place rich in customs and traditions, incorporates not just the usual religious ritual - the same for the majority of festivals performed in Japan - and the offering of performing arts, but also a procession of historical costumes and hairstyles. In Awajishima, the only offering for the deities are the performing arts - traditional dances and storytelling. One such performance features Ms. Tomoko Yamashita, a storyteller specializing in *The Tale of Genji* translated in the

modern Kyoto dialect. Ms. Yamashita is the proud owner of hair that almost reaches her ankles (as can be observed in the photo below), which she grew in an attempt to better understand the lifestyle of women from the Heian period (794~1185). During that time, noble women (*The Tale of Genji* is only concerned with aristocracy) were very restricted in their movements by the multi-layered clothes they wore, and by the length of their hair. In our times, adopting the Heian fashion would not be a realistic endeavor, so Ms. Yamashita contented herself with letting her hair grow to similar lengths. "Like the women with bound feet in China, Heian women were the property of men, kept prisoners in their own bodies by long and cumbersome garments, as well as long hair," she stated in an interview from December 7, 2021.

Ms. Tomoko Yamashita performing at Tôhatsu Kansha Sai

After having grown it for almost 15 years, hair has become not only a symbol of life for Ms. Yamashita, but also a locus for memories, and she considers that it since the Heian

period, it has fulfilled the same function, being associated with feelings and remembrance, that is why many women cut their hair after a break up - to lose the memories and start anew. She also mentioned a hanging scroll she saw at a nunnery, where hair had been glued to calligraphy characters - a combination of the “sacred and the profane” (her words) indicating that the nuns have renounced the profane world by cutting their hair.

Two things become apparent when analyzing these interviews with respondents who represent both the world of religious rituals and the lay world: one, despite its enduring qualities, the myths connected to hair and combs recorded in the ancient chronicles of Japan seem completely forgotten when it comes to contemporary practices. Two, while ancient myths and ritual were focused more on universal gestures and patterns of thought, nowadays the emphasis is placed on the individual and its connection to the divine, to the source of life, as well as the feelings that accompany one’s spiritual journey and existential encounters. The shrine representatives spoke in detached, realistic terms about the gratitude that must be expressed towards deities as something that should be done because it has always been so. Ms. Tanaka and Ms. Yamashita added personal experiences to the narrative, emphasizing the idea of being a woman, able to create life and to connect to the primordial source of creation - an extraordinary power bestowed only on the female members of the population, symbolically and aesthetically expressed through hair.

## 5. Conclusions

The fact that humans have always cherished the natural adornment represented by hair, and deplored its loss is nothing new; historians and anthropologists have traced the origins of such behavior to pre-historic times. Equally unsurprising are the efforts made by the people of the 21st century to preserve and even enhance the natural beauty of hair, but the means of our times are more related to science than belief and ritual practice. Nevertheless, in this day and age, a company whose success is founded upon scientific research and progress makes the decision of expressing gratitude to the gods for the results of their hard labor. Resorting to prayer when everything else fails is not unexpected, however, Mikami Shrine seems also focused on the offering gratitude for what is already there, rather than prayers for what is missing. This type of ritual behavior can be traced back to the sacred history of Japan, when gods and heroes asserted their strength not through fierce battles (like their counterparts in Irish sagas, to give just an example), but through symbolic gestures and hairstyles that suggested endless resources of vitality and power.

At the same time, we witness a shift from the narrative-based ritual to one focused on individual belief. Many contemporary Japanese large-scale festivals still maintain the structure proposed by Mircea Eliade: they are reenactments of a "sacred history" made up of events that took place ab origine (the mythical time) and which explain the existence of man and civilization (1963: 119). Herbert Plutschow elaborates on this principle with a focus on Japanese culture: "Most matsuri seem

to renew a past event or events understood as the beginning of a, or the new order under which the celebrants live. […] Time and the ritual that renews it are themselves systems of order that commemorate and revive the order first established long ago. […] the festival repeats and renews that order." (1996: 28-29) According to these theories (which are widely supported by examples in contemporary Japanese society - Gion Matsuri is based on the legend of Susano-wo as a visiting deity, who punishes ungrateful humans with a plague, Tenjin Matsuri is an appeasement ritual for the vengeful ghost of an aristocrat scholar, the kagura dances reenact the chaos that ensued after the Sun Goddess hid in a cave, as well as the re-establishment of order once she is brought out, and so on and so forth), rituals and matsuri need a story to give them substance, to provide a genealogical thread to the "divine history" of primordial times.

Nevertheless, the newly created festivals from Yasui Konpiragû and Izanagi Jingû do not link themselves to the acknowledged myths - although the connection could have been easily made - and appear to be founded in and perpetuate a simpler belief: humans should be grateful to the deities (*kami*) for the life they have received, and that is all the necessary narrative. To paraphrase Eliade, who said that the myth about the origin of death is true because death exists, within the contemporary Japanese system of beliefs that kami must be real because humans are alive, and part of that divine spark must reside in hair, which keeps growing and regenerating itself as long as that crumb of divinity is kept pure through rituals of gratitude and pacification.

From a ritual perspective, in Japanese culture hair is a way of asserting humanity - by adopting the hairstyles imposed by society across the ages - and at the same time of distancing oneself from it. The deities, *kami*, are at the top of the hierarchy, their wild hair a symbol of immortality and constant renewal; next are the ghosts and other supernatural beings, whose disheveled hair makes stand in contrast to humans, creatures of another world and harbingers of chaos. Their hair may be wild, but it is lifeless and powerless. The next tier is represented by religious practitioners, those who are intermediaries between the divine and the mortal realms: sumo wrestlers who perform fertility rites and offer their strength to the gods, *miko*, the shrine maidens who toil daily for the kami, and also offer them their artistic skills during the sacred dances, and Buddhist priests, who give up their hair in an attempt to abandon human passions and desires. Humans come last, constrained both by society, who imposes them norms on how to style their hair - more according to fashion than other standards nowadays, and nature - who does not allow for dreams of everlasting youth and beauty. Science has come a long way in its quest for the "philosopher's stone," yet immortality remains a distant ideal; in the meantime, ritual practices remain a constant element of human daily life, offering comfort, solace, and hope that by re-enacting sacred histories order can be restored in the world.

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# Amabie as Play in Kansai

*Kathryn M. TANAKA*

## 1. Introduction: Origins of Amabie

Since 2020 the world has adjusted to a "new normal" caused by the novel coronavirus pandemic and how it has changed our communities, our cities, and our world. Part of the media coverage of the pandemic has included tales that intend to help people find hope in confusing and difficult times. An example from early in the pandemic was viral videos showing people in Italy spontaneously singing together.[1] Museums all over the world began to offer virtual tours and talks, and play troupes and musical groups began offering virtual performances. Public lectures on almost any topic imaginable, in virtually every country and language, were held online. People began making art that featured facemasks or other creative work that reflected life with the novel coronaviruss.[2] While daily patterns of life were

[1] See, for example, this *New Yorker* video on music bringing people together under lockdown in Italy, "The Italians Making Music on Balconies Under Coronavirus Quarantine," available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EBByYjjvNzs

[2] Johnstone, Fiona. "Art in isolation: artistic responses to Covid-19," *The Polyphony: Conversations Across the Medical Humanities*, 16 June 2020. Accessed 27 October

interrupted by quarantine, many people found creative ways to create new communities and provide support for each other online or in socially distanced ways.

Japan was no different than the rest of the world. Japanese museums, artists, and authors have hosted events in multiple languages to engage with the global community in pandemic times. But perhaps Japan's biggest contribution to the global online community during the pandemic is what has become known as the Amabie Boom. Beginning in February 2020, Amabie began circulating online, first attracting attention within Japan but quickly spreading around the world.

This paper traces the origins of Amabie as a *yōkai*, or a mythological creature of Japanese folklore, from the southern region of Japan in Kumamoto to a global phenomenon. It examines the Amabie boom in the Kansai area of Japan, the western region of the country that includes the major cities of Osaka, Kyoto, and Kobe. Ultimately, this paper treats the use of Amabie in Kansai as a case study into the ways in which through the figure of Amabie, popular culture, commercialization, and ritual performances intersect through the idea of play in pandemic times. In particular, this paper traces the way in which Amabie in Kansai is an example of a localized sense of play and ritual that is in dialogue with Amabie's global popularity.

Amabie initially appeared online in association with the novel coronavirus pandemic in the winter of 2020. The creature, who was most often depicted as a feminine

2020: https://thepolyphony.org/2020/06/16/art-in-isolation-artistic-responses-to-covid-19/

character, appeared at a time when the virus was beginning to spread rapidly and lockdowns were beginning across the globe, meaning that for many people, daily life was disrupted. It is at precisely these times of disruption, when there is "a kind of moratorium on their familiar world" that the notion of play, or the ludic, becomes important to people.[3] As Massimo Raveri argues, "'Reality' is a relativistic dimension and play offers the possibility of 'restructuring' it, constantly modifying its perspectives and aims."[4] In this restructuring, this reimagining, Raveri notes that play offers the possibility of being free because play "rearranges the trivia of daily life so that it appears in a different, estranged light."[5] In short, seeking a source of play is arguably a natural human response to stress.

During a pandemic, when globally people face unprecedented challenges caused by disrupted work and home lives, when daily life has become unfamiliar and reordered, play can offer freedom from a life that has new and seemingly inescapable stresses. Both trauma, such as that caused by the pandemic, and play can restructure society because they are what Raveri calls "parallel states."[6] For some, play with Amabie has become a small source of pleasure in times of upheaval and tragic loss of life.

Dailut-Bal argues that play in Japan is a means of "organizing certain aspects of social life and social relations", and expands that to note that the forms play takes transform

[3] Raveri, Massimo, "Introduction." *Japan at Play: The Ludic and Logic the Power.* Joy Hendry and Massimo Raveri, ed. London and New York: Routledge, 2002: 1.
[4] Raveri, 1.
[5] Raveri, 5.
[6] Raveri, 8.

over time in response to social changes.[7] She further defines play as "a symbolic activity in which a temporal alternative framing of reality is enabled by a cognitive ability for simultaneous framings of reality", identifying an "otherness" in the alternative reality of play.[8] This alternative reality, she states, "has the potential of becoming an escapist haven, an experimental laboratory, or a platform for expressing frustrations and subjective worlds not permitted within the more conventional norms of society."[9] In a time when the world was facing an acute global health crisis unprecedented in recent years, Amabie gave voice to collective frustrations and desires in Japan in many different ways.

## 2. Amabie's Origins in Folklore and Online

But what is Amabie? The creature has been described as a *yōkai*, which is a Japanese mythical creature. According to legend, it appeared in the sea in what is today Kumamoto and said that when epidemics spread, to show the creature's image to the world. The oldest extant reference to Amabie is a *kawaraban*, or a wood- or tile-block printed broadsheet that was used to report current events during the Edo period (1600-1868). Held in the Kyoto University archives, the sheet is titled "Uncanny being from the Sea at Biko (Image of Amabie)". The text accompanying the image reads:

> "A glowing being appeared every night in the sea of Higo Province [today's Kumamoto prefecture], so an official went

[7] Dalot-Bul, Michal, *License to Play: The Ludic in Japanese Culture*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2014: xx.
[8] Dalot-Bul, xxviii.
[9] Dalot-Bul, xxix.

to investigate, resulting in his discovery of a being like that in this drawing. “I live in the sea and I am called Amabie. This year’s good harvest will continue for six years, but at the same time disease will spread. Copy my image and show me to people as possible.” So saying, the being disappeared into the sea.

The middle of the fourth month, the year Kōka-3 (mid-May, 1846).”[10]

Image 1. Amabie. Photograph courtesy of the Main Library, Kyoto University[11]

[10] Translation adapted from Furukawa, Yuki and Rei Kansaku, “Amabie: A Japanese Symbol of the COVID-19 Pandemic.” JAMA 324(6) 17 July 2020: 531.
[11] *Biko kuni kaichū no kai (Amabie no zu).* [“Yōkai from the Sea at Biko (Image of Amabie)”] Photograph courtesy of the Main Library, Kyoto University.

The image shows a mermaid-like figure, with long hair, diamond-shaped eyes, a beak, long hair, and a scaly, fish-like body with three appendages. These characteristics are preserved in modern images of Amabie, making it instantly identifiable.

Unlike other *yōkai*, Amabie's historical references are basically limited to this single, extant broadsheet. There are no other literary works, broadsheets, or records of the creature's appearance or deeds. In the pantheon of *yōkai*, Amabie was not popular or well-known, until the creature was picked up by one of Japan's foremost *yōkai* experts, who is also one of the country's most famous and beloved manga and anime artists, Mizuki Shigeru (1922-2015). In part because of the appearance of the creature in Mizuki's manga and television, Amabie has continuously appeared on the fringes of pop culture as a fairly well-known *yōkai* associated with premonition.

Indeed, Mizuki includes the Amabie character in his major work, *Nihon yōkai taizen-yōkai, ano yo, kami-sama* [Encyclopedia of Japanese Folk Creatures: Mythical Creatures, The Other World, Gods]. In it, he writes that as a creature of premonition and with a shape reminiscent of a mermaid, it is akin to Jinja-hime (Shrine Princess), a creature with a snake or eel-like body, the head of a human woman, and two horns. Mizuki notes that creatures like Amabie and Jinja-hime who appear suddenly from the ocean are closer to the gods, and may be appropriately considered "divine creatures."[12] And perhaps due to Mizuki, like Jinja-hime, a woman-snake *yōkai*, in Mizuki's later work,

[12] Mizuki Shigeru, *Kettei-ban: Nihon yōkai taizen-yōkai, ano yo, kami-sama* [Definitive Edition: Encyclopedia of Japanese Folk Creatures: Creatures, The Other World, Gods]. Tokyo: Kodansha bunkō, 2014, 57.

Amabie was also depicted with feminine attributes. Many artists and creators have this example, and Amabie is now generally depicted and discussed as a female *yōkai*.

Amabie and Jinja-hime are just two among many premonitory creatures in Japanese folklore. Other such creatures include most famously Kudan or Kudabe, a prophetic human-bovine chimera, and Amabiko, an ape-like, hairy creature with three legs. Indeed, recent scholarship by cultural historian Nagano Eishun lists up to eighteen different variants of prophetic *yōkai.*[13] Unlike these other prophetic monsters in Japanese folklore, Amabie became the target of global attention for four reasons: first, Amabie appeared specifically to confront and expel pandemic illness; second, as Mizuki Shigeru notes, with a form not unlike a mermaid, it is a *yōkai* easily adaptable into a feminine and playful character, rather than threatening monster; third, and perhaps most importantly, due in large part to Mizuki Shigeru's work, Amabie was well-known to folklorists and Japanese manga artists who drew their inspiration from Japanese folklore. Finally, however, there was an element of luck in that it was Amabie who went viral on Twitter, as well. Amabie was never completely forgotten, but rather remained a niche character until propelled to global viral fame.

Indeed, Twitter is peppered with references to the appearance of Amabie in Mizuki Shigeru's work and in particular to a 2007 episode of the television anime *Ge ge ge*

[13] Nagano, Eishun, "Yogenjū Amabiko kō-"Amabiko" wo tegagarini" [Thoughts on the Prophetic Beast Amabiko-Hints from Amabiko] *Jakuetsu Kyōdo Kenkyū* [Jakuetsu Local Research] 49 (2): 1-30. See also Tsunemitsu Tōru*, Yogen suru yōkai* [Monsters who Give Prophecies], Tokyo: Nihon minzoku shinkōkai, 2016.

*no Kitaro* in which she was featured.[14] In the 2007 animation series, Amabie was slightly transformed into a mermaid-like *yōkai*, reflecting a "cute" transformation; her character likewise is often comedic. At the end of 2019, Twitter references to Amabie were predominantly to *Ge ge ge no Kitaro* and Amabie's "cute" appearance in this anime and the ways in which she used her "premonition" super power to help the other characters in the series.

Image 2, 3: Screen shots from **Mizuki Shigeru's Ge ge ge no Kitaro (Dai go ki).**[15]
Used with permission from Toei Studios.

[14] Ge ge ge no Kitaro (Dai go saku) "Dai nijū roku wa: Yōkai aidoru?! Amabie" [Kitaro Ge ge ge! 5th series, season 1, episode 26: Yōkai pop star?! Amabie. Written by Sanjō Riku, directed by Kakudō Hiroyuki. Toei Animation. Original air date: 30 September 2007.

[15] Ge ge ge no Kitaro (Dai go saku) "Dai nijū roku wa: Yōkai aidoru?! Amabie" [Kitaro Ge ge ge! 5th series, season 1, episode 26: Yōkai pop star?! Amabie. Written by Sanjō Riku, directed by Kakudō Hiroyuki. Toei Animation. Original air date: 30 September 2007.

## 3. Amabie in Popular Culture during the Novel Coronavirus Pandemic 2020-2021

In fact, Mizuki Shigeru's legacy was evoked in the first tweets connecting Amabie to the global COVID-19 pandemic. A Mizuki Shigeru fan wrote, "Nezumi Otoko: 'One hundred and fifty years ago, in the sea of Kumamoto prefecture, a creature who was half human and half fish called Amabie appeared. She apparently predicted that if illness spread, showing copies of her picture to people would cure it immediately. This is a creature I want to appear now, as the novel coronavirus is spreading…'"[16] A second tweet two minutes later by the same user shared Mizuki Shigeru's original drawing of Amabie and asked, "By the way, here's Amabie's appearance! If you see it, neither corona nor the flu will be scary!?"[17]

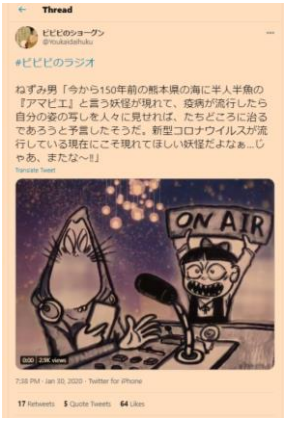



Image 4, 5: Screenshots from Twitter, @Youkaidaihuku[18]

[16] Bi bi bi no shōgun (@Youkaidaihuku). "Tweet Message." 30 January 2020, 7:38 PM. All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.
[17] Bi bi bi no shōgun (@Youkaidaihuku). "Tweet Message." 30 January 2020, 7:40 PM.
[18] Bi bi bi no shōgun (@Youkaidaihuku). "Tweet Message." 30 January 2020, 7:38 PM and Bi bi bi shogun (@Youkaidaihuku). "Tweet Message." 30 January 2020, 7:40 PM.

The first connection of Amabie to the COVID-19 pandemic, then, relied on prior references to the character in popular culture, in particular the work of Mizuki Shigeru, and her image was primarily shared and referenced within the Mizuki Shigeru and *Ge ge ge no Kitaro* fandom on Twitter. But this changed on 27 February, when folklore artist Orochidō shared an updated image of Amabie and wrote: "A certain virus is spreading with unstoppable momentum, but a creature once said, 'If an epidemic occurs, draw my image and show it to people as a preventative measure.' It's called Amabie."[19]


Image 6: Screen shot of Orochidō's Amabie Tweet.
Used with Permission from the Artist.[20]

[19] Orochidō (@orochidou). "Tweet Message." 27 February 2020, 6:11 PM.
[20] Orochidō (@orochidou). "Tweet Message." 27 February 2020, 6:11 PM.

Medical doctors Furukawa Yuki and Kansaku Rei note that Orochidō's tweet is significant in that this is the first piece of original art shared on Twitter to feature Amabie and a specific call to share her image. They further state it is significant as it "provides a time stamp for the current #Amabie phenomenon (if it didn't start it) and appeared to fuel the #AmabieChallenge on Twitter, a superspreader event that had the public drawing Amabie and showing it to others in line with the character's original prophesy."[21]

Orochidō himself notes that his tweet introduced Amabie to the world, and he shared her in the spirit of play, never imaging how she would spread around the world, with even the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare using her image in a campaign to raise awareness about the novel coronavirus.[22] In fact, it was a fluke he posted his image of Amabie at all: the coronavirus pandemic gave him spare time to redo some art he lost in a hard drive crash, and as he was working on redrawing, his attention was caught by Jinja-hime and the prophecy she had made, telling people to show her image when cholera ravaged the land.[23] This made him think of other prophetic beasts who had told people to display their images in times of illness: "Amabiko, Kudabe, Kudan… I had lost the data for Jinja-hime, and at this point I didn't have the original. I hadn't drawn Kudabe, Kudan, Amabiko. All that

[21] Furukawa, Yuki and Rei Kansaku, "Amabie: A Japanese Symbol of the COVID-19 Pandemic." JAMA 324(6) 17 July 2020: 532.
[22] Orochidō, "Amabie sōdō no tenmatsu-yogenjū no chikara wo karite ekibyō taisan wo nerau" [The Beginning and End of the Amabie Furor: Using the Power of Prophetic Beasts to Pray for Plague Relief," *Kai to Yū* [Unknowns and Spirits] vol. 005, 31 August 2020: 392-393.
[23] Orochidō 2020, 392.

remained was Amabie."[24] Indeed, Orochidō shared on Twitter that he had wanted to start this challenge with Jinja-hime as there were more archival sources about her and materials about her, and he only did not use Jinja-hime because of the lost data.[25]

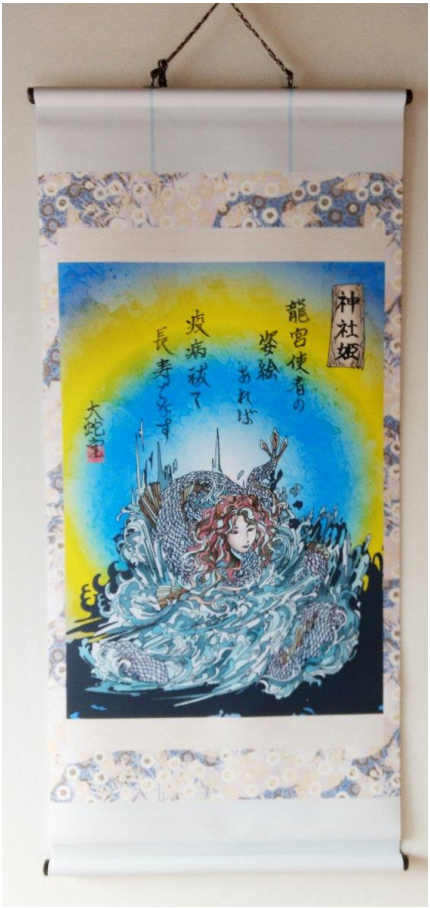


Image 7: Screen shot of Orochidō's Jinja-hime.
Used with Permission from the Artist.

[24] Orochidō 2020, 392-393.
[25] Orochidō (@orochidou). "Tweet Message." 10 December 2020, 6:48 PM.

His Amabie art work had been drawn specifically for an Amabie event that opened in April 2019 at a *yōkai* specialty store, Daikaiten in Tokyo, so he knew that "many artists had already drawn" Amabie. He knew that when he shared her image on Twitter it was with the intent others would join: "I wanted everyone to find it fun, and I wanted them to join in."[26] And, Orochidō notes, he wasn't disappointed: other artists such as Shigeoka Hidemitsu joined with "many other *yōkai* artists to tweet their own drawings of Amabie."[27] And from there, he states, Amabie spread beyond the niche of *yōkai* artists into the mainstream, helped by the hashtags #Amabie and #AmabieChallenge.[28]

Again, after the original art shared by Orochidō, other artists quickly began sharing their work and using the hashtag #Amabie in Japanese. As Orochidō notes, one of the early examples that was picked up by English language media was a tweet from manga artist Shigeoka Hidemitsu that included the following image of Amabie, and read: "Novel Coronavirus prevention measures."[29] In *The New Yorker*, Matt Alt wrote: "In late February 2020, a manga artist named Hide Shigeoka [sic] tweeted an illustration of the creature with the tongue-in-cheek caption, "A new corona virus countermeasure," appending the Japanese hashtag #Amabie for good measure."[30] Similarly, the Spanish newspaper El País and the Italian news

[26] Orochidō 2020, 393.
[27] Orochidō 2020, 393.
[28]Orochidō 2020, 393.
[29] Shigeoka, Hidemitsu (@shigeokahide). "Tweet Message." 29 February 2020. 9:37 AM.
[30] Alt, Matt. "From Japan, a Mascot for the Pandemic." New Yorker. 9 April, 2020. Available online: https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/from-japan-a-mascot-for-the-pandemic

website Quotidiano, among others, also cited Shigeoka (as Hide rather than Hidemitsu) as the origin of the Amabie boom on Twitter.[31] Shigeoka himself, however, clarifies that he simply picked up Orochidō's challenge in a blog post.[32]

While the *New Yorker* article slightly mistook both the author's name and the translation of the tweet - it does not say "new coronavirus countermeasure", but rather "novel coronavirus countermeasure", the references to Shigeoka's tweet in English-language media spurred the appearance and popularization of the #Amabie and #AmabieChallenge hashtags on Twitter in English. Thus, as Orochidō notes, it was other artists and resharing that turned Amabie into a global phenomenon, taking the challenge beyond Twitter art and hashtags to explode into everything from cosplay to beer labels.[33]

Orochidō reiterates on Twitter that he did not share her because of Mizuki Shigeru, because she was a famous *yōkai*, or even because he was even particularly fond of her. He makes it very clear that he wanted his art to be taken in a spirit of fun: "'Draw me if there's an epidemic spread,' so I thought that especially now it would be fun if everyone

[31] Leone, Alessandro. "El 'yokai' que Japón dibuja contra la pandemia." [The 'Yokai' Japan Draws on Against the Pandemic]. El País. 30 April 2020. Available online: https://elpais.com/cultura/2020-04-29/el-yokai-que-japon-dibuja-contra-la-pandemia.html
"Giappone, il mostro-sirena del folklore diventa virale contro il Coronavirus," [In Japan, the mermaid monster preventing the Coronavirus goes viral] Quotidiano, 24 April, 2020. Available online: https://www.quotidiano.net/magazine/coronavirus-giappone-mostro-sirena-1.5120114
[32] Shigeoka Hidemitsu, 2020 Amabie sōdō 2 [The 2020 Amabie Furor Part 2]. Blog Post. 6 May 2020. Available online: https://ameblo.jp/shigeoka-h/entry-12595516043.html
[33] Orochidō, 393.

drew it; I wasn't really thinking anything but that. I am surprised that as it's become more popular, it's been touted as effective to prevent the spread of disease, and I feel a kind of horror that it went on to be used as a commercial tool."[34] Other *yōkai* artists, such as Shigeoka Hidemitsu, also seemed skeptical of Amabie and the commercial explosion following her viral sharing.[35]


Image 8. Screenshot of Amabie by Shigeoka Hidemitsu, 2020. Used with permission from the artist.[36]

[34] Orochidō (@orochidou). "Tweet Message." 10 December 2020, 6:48 PM.
[35] Shigeoka, Hidemitsu, *Obake Rajio* [Ghostly Radio], "Dai ni kai-Amabie ni tsuite no maki" [Episode 2: About Amabie], 3 November 2020. Podcast.
[36] Shigeoka, 2020.

But no matter what the original intent of the coterie of *yōkai* artists was, once Amabie was noticed on Twitter, other Japanese artists began sharing their Amabie artwork with the #Amabie hashtag. Almost immediately, Amabie attracted international attention, with newspapers around the world picking up the story in the spring and summer of 2020. Artists and advertisers began sharing images of the creature using the hashtags #Amabie and #AmabieChallenge across social media. And as she became a trend on social media, Japanese news networks began to report on the trend, and the phenomenon received additional media attention.

It is hardly an understatement to say that, driven by the COVID-19 global pandemic, the world also experienced an Amabie boom in 2020. Picking up the reporting from Japan, news media internationally noted that the online play with Amabie created a sense of unity and gives people hope in the face of a new virus that isn't fully understood by medicine yet. But in fact, *yōkai* scholar Kagawa Masanobu of the Hyogo Prefectural Museum of History says there are three reasons why Amabie became so popular during the coronavirus pandemic. First, she reappeared online just as the novel coronavirus began to spread and change peoples' lives. Second, she reappeared in a time of digital media where people like to share their art online. Finally, Kagawa says Amabie's design is similar to *yuru-kyara* (cute mascot characters that represent cities or programs), or other cute characters that populate Japan today. For Kagawa, Amabie is a reflection of modern aesthetics.[37]

[37] Yamao, Yukie, "Plague-fighting monster Amabie goes viral amid COVID-19 crisis," *The Asahi Shimbun*, 13 June 2020. Accessed 27 October 2020:

The original intent of Orochidō should also not be lost here, however; he shared Amabie in a spirit of "play" (*asobi*) in the face of abrupt social transformation.[38] He also noted that the lack of archival evidence in Amabie's case made the *yōkai* that made him dubious about sharing her, but also made Amabie more open to play and different interpretations; in a sense, there was more freedom to play with Amabie than there would have been with a *yōkai* with rich archival resources and cultural references. With so little known about Amabie, artists were free to fill in the archival blank with play in any way they liked. And during the initial days of the Amabie boom, it was primarily *yōkai* artists sharing their interpretations of Amabie. But it soon spread to others online, and from there, to other cultural spheres: primarily, the community, the spiritual and the commercial.

## 4. Amabie as Community

While Amabie began as a form of play online, her popularity quickly appeared in local community spaces. As people found their interactions restricted by the first state of emergency declared in Japan between April and May 2020, and then by the promotion of continued social distance, community groups became creative in promoting safe interactions to connect their members. Amabie featured prominently in some community activities. For example, in September 2020, the city of Nishinomiya in Hyogo prefecture asked the local manga artist who had designed the city's

http://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/13416948. I thank Miyazaki Yukari for bringing this article to my attention.

[38] Orochidō, personal communication, 10 February 2021.

mascot character Miyatan to create an Amabie character the city could distribute to businesses actively participating in coronavirus countermeasures. The resulting character was distributed by students at a local women's university, Mukogawa University.[39] In this use of Amabie as raising awareness for Coronavirus countermeasures, the city of Nishinomiya was echoing the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare's deployment of Amabie on a similar national campaign, as seen in Image 10.


Image 9: Amabie sticker for the city of Nishinomiya by Takai Yoshikazu[40]
Used with permission from the city of Nishinomiya

[39] Kobayashi Nobuya, "Korona taisaku torikomu ten ōen Nishinomiya shi ga PR sutekka seisaku" [Supporting businesses that implement coronavirus countermeasures Nishinomiya City Makes PR Stickers" *Kobe Shimbun*, 3 September 2020. Available online: https://www.kobe-np.co.jp/news/hanshin/ 202009/ 0013659647.shtml, accessed on October 30, 2020.

[40] Image online on "Shingata corona taisaku toreta ten ni sutekka haifu" [Distributing Stickers to Shops that have taken Novel Coronavirus Countermeasures]. *Sun Television News*. Available online: https://sun-tv.co.jp/suntvnews/news/2020/09/02/28328/, accessed on October 30, 2020.


Image 10. Amabie used in a Ministry of Health, Labor

The city further used the character of Amabie together with the city's mascot characters (Miyatan, in blue with a crown, and their sidekick Minyakko) on their website to promote registration for eligibility for a vaccine as they became available.

Image 11: City of Nishinomiya characters, including Amabie, promoting vaccination, reproduced with permission[41]

[41] "Shingata korona wakuchin no sesshu ni tsuite" [On the vaccination shots for the novel corona virus]. Nishinomiya City Home Page. Available online: https://www.nishi.or.jp/smph/kurashi/anshin/infomation/vaccine.html. Accessed 30 June 2021.

Thus, for some localities and indeed for the national government, Amabie served the function of mascot characters or *yuru-kyara*: engaging with the public and raising interest in what they represent - in this case, COVID-19 prevention measures and vaccinations.[42]

In addition, to using the stickers and the Amabie character to raise awareness of COVID countermeasures, the city of Nishinomiya further evoked Amabie as a way to create community bonds while still socially distancing. For example, the central library of the city of Nishinomiya created a community Amabie that allowed residents to write their words of encouragement or hope on the figure's scales as a means of supporting their fellow community members. Before the pandemic, as in many communities, the library was a central gathering place. In addition to the main library space, the building featured a community history museum, a café, art galleries, and community rooms. Many elderly residents and students relied on the library for social events, so having use and hours restricted meant a loss of connection for many people. The use of Amabie's scales as a means of communication allowed for connection and a sense of camaraderie despite social distancing.

[42] Occhi, Debra J. "Kumamon: Japan's Surprisingly Cheeky Mascot," in: Alisa Freedman and Toby Slade, eds. *Introducing Japanese Popular Culture*. Routledge: London and New York: 2018, 13-14.

Figure 11: Amabie in the Central Library of Nishinomiya City, September 2020

The use of Amabie's scales as a way to share messages with a broader community appears again in a display outside of the Community Support Facility, Furebono. Run by Nishinomiya City's Social Welfare Bureau, the Amabie display was crafted with the cooperation of two support facilities from different districts of the city. The facilities are community spaces, where local produce and crafts are sold, and residents often gather to chat, share tea and snacks, or read books. With activity restricted due to the virus, the staff wrote on an explanatory sign that they constructed the Amabie figures with the fervent desire corona would be curable soon, and community events would once again be able to be enjoyed by all.[43] Similar to the Amabie crafted at the library, this figure also featured scales with written

[43] "On Yamate Road, a Huge Amabie is Dressed as Santa." Nishinomiya Tsūshin [Nishinomiya News] 9 December 2020. Available online: https://nishi2.jp/67401/?fbclid=IwAR0X5iOjgFXrh7ExBvuRIhr5w-a9HrAHIsNdVwd6NGw8EAb0asTu2fyY2W0

messages from community residents. The messages ranged from encouraging notes talking about being in this together to commentaries on a hit anime television program, *Demon Slayer* (*Kimetsu no yaeba*).


Image 12, 13: Amabie outside Furebono, December 2020

Finally, the Nishinomiya branch of the Junior Chamber International featured Amabie in several youth-oriented social outreach events that were designed to be corona countermeasures compliant. The first was an art event, where children drew pictures of Amabie. Then, in a symbol of solidarity, the individual images were collected and photographed together as a giant Amabie display as seen in Image 14. The Junior Chamber International also used the image of Amabie to advertise a socially distanced October Halloween event, as seen in the image below, making it no

surprise that several participants came to the event dressed in Amabie Halloween costumes, as seen in Image 15, taken from the Junior Chamber International website, and Image 16, from a local newspaper article.[44]


Image 14: Amabie poster on display in the window of the Junior Chamber International office, October 2020. Image by Kawasaki Hitoshi, used with permission.

[44] "Korona nabe no Halloween Amabie Sugata de chiiki to kōryū" [Halloween in the time of Corona: Interacting in the Community Dressed as Amabie." Kobe Shimbun. 1 November 2020. Available online: https://www.kobe-np.co.jp/news/ hanshin/ 202011/0013829692.shtml. For more on the event see https://nishinomiyajc.or.jp/ 2020/10/15/jigyo1031/, accessed on December 12, 2020.


Image 15 and 16: Junior Chamber International Halloween Event, October 2020

While not all of these community uses of Amabie were spearheaded by the city hall, Amabie's use in the city of Nishinomiya reflects what may be broad trends across Japan: deploying the character in a spirit of play, similar to a *yuru-kyara*, to create community connections and raise awareness of important issues during unusual times.

### 5. Amabie as Spiritual Play

Amabie has not only been used as something akin to a *yuru-kyara*, however. As Raveri notes, play can also be an important part of spiritual or ritual practice. Indeed, he notes

that play is "an integral part of Japanese ritual tradition."[45] Indeed, Carmen Săpunaru Tămaş has discussed how matsuri, or festival culture, in Japan is a blend of both religious and entertainment ritual practices.[46] Dalot-Bal also traces the etymology of the Japanese concept of play, *asobi*, to argue that "the earliest appearances of *asobi* in ancient Japanese texts suggest that the cultural concept of play was closely related to religious rituals."[47] Dalot-Bal traces this connection back to the use of "*asobi*" in Japanese mythologies and folk tales, where singing, dancing, and laughing were ritual behaviors.

In addition to being deeply connected to the concept of play, religious practices, or as W. Evan Young describes them, "religious therapies", and healing rituals have historically been a part of medical treatments in Japan.[48] Temples and shrines have also long been the site of practices and rituals meant to dispel illness, and these practices have often incorporated imagery of supernatural figures. In the Tokugawa period (1603-1868), during epidemics, prints of deities fighting personified illnesses were a notable part of Japan's print culture.[49] Young frames illness, in particular

[45] Raveri, 7.
[46] Carmen Săpunaru Tămaş, *Ritual Practices and Daily Rituals: An Introduction to the World of Matsuri*. Bucharest: Editura Pro Universitaria, 2018.
[47] Dalot-Bal, 2.
[48] Young, William Evan. *Family Matters: Managing Illness in Late Tokugawa Japan, 1750-1868*.
Dissertation, Princeton University, 2015, 108.
[49] See, for example, Gregory Smits, "Warding Off Calamity in Japan: A Comparison of the 1855 Catfish Prints and the 1862 Measles Prints," East Asian Science, Technology, and Medicine 30 (2009): 9-31 and Bettina Gramlich-Oka, "The Body Economic: Japan's Cholera Epidemic of 1858 in Popular Discourse," EASTM 30 (2009): 32-73, and Hartmut Rotermund, "Illness Illustrated: Socio-historical Dimensions of Late Edo Measles Pictures (Hashika-e)," in *Written Texts – Visual*

smallpox, as "an event in which illness, family rituals, and religious practice were woven into one."[50] Part of the religious, or spiritual, response to illness has historically included protective charms, performative services, and prayers or wishes written on *ema* (wooden votive tablets) sold at shrines.

And this history of religion as an essential prong in the treatment of illness is echoed in our experiences in Japan today. In fact, the 8 February 2020 national daily newspaper, the *Asahi Shimbun*, featured a half-page story, complete with full-color photographs, about the discovery of a Hakutaku, or Kutabe bovine-human chimera idol, in Osaka's Tennō-ji, a structure built under the auspices of famed Japanese ruler Shōtoku Taishi (574-622 CE).[51] Found hidden behind a signboard, the article notes the legendary power Hakutaku has to ward off illness and calls it "fate" that the figure would be discovered during the novel coronavirus pandemic.[52] But in the case of the novel coronavirus, more than in the figure of Kutabe or Hakutaku we can see a response to a pandemic that similarly includes both play, commercialization, and religious responses in the figure of Amabie.

In the Kansai area, in particular, some shrines such as Hirota Shrine in Nishinomiya began selling amulets featuring Amabie for visitors to take home and hang in their houses.

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*Texts: Woodblock-printed Media in Early Modern Japan*, ed. Susanne Formanek and Sepp Linhart (Amsterdam: Hotei Publishing, 2005), 251–82.

[50] Young, 110.

[51] Yasui, Kengo, "Ekibyō taisan! Reijū 'Hakutaku' shutsugen ka" [Ward off Illness! Has the Mythical Creature 'Hakutaku' Appeared?] *Asahi Shimbun* 8 February 2020, evening edition, p. 1.

[52] Yasui, 1.

Hirota shrine also displays large *ema* tablets, where visitors could write their prayers, as seen below. The tablets are periodically replaced, and after a tablet was filled with the prayers of visitors, it was burned in a ritual. At the beginning of the pandemic, the tablets featured the kinds of wishes or prayers visitors would frequently write on such tablets in shrines: hopes to pass tests or entrance exams, wishes for romance, or to find a job. But also conspicuous among the messages were prayers about the novel coronavirus. For example, some prayers read: “Don’t let the virus get in my school”, “Make the virus end quickly”, or “Let’s do our best [to defeat corona]”.


Image 17: Hirota Shrine communal ema tablet, April 20, 2020.
Image by author.

As the display of the large tablets continued, and as visitors came specifically to buy Amabie amulets, however, in a very brief time, the prayers written on the communal tablets began to reflect an association of the shrine with Amabie. In addition, likely spurred by the words attributed to Amabie that showing her image would dispel disease, visitors even began to add pictures of Amabie to their prayers, as can be seen below:

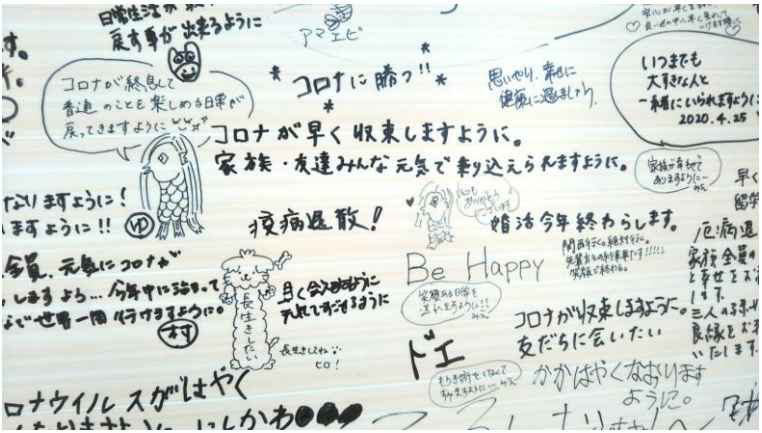


Image 18: Hirota Shrine communal ema tablet, May 28, 2020. Image by author.

Here, in Image 18, Amabie is drawn and her name is mentioned, and the messages show a preoccupation with health, happiness, and a return to normalcy through dispelling illness. One message reads, “We’ll beat Corona”, and another says, “I wish we’d recover from Corona. I want to see my friends.” The larger Amabie pictured is echoing this sentiment, with the speech bubble stating: “I wish corona would end and things will get back to normal where we enjoy our days.” Visitors have continued to draw Amabie on the *ema* boards well into 2021.


Image 19: Hirota Shrine communal *ema* tablet, June 28, 2020.
Image by author.

In addition to the proliferation of images of Amabie, as stated above, more of the messages showed a preoccupation with health, with the majority praying for the continued health of their friends, family, and the world, or for corona to disappear quickly. But the images are interesting, in that once images of Amabie began to appear, visitors began to add other images that reflected their hopes and dreams. Amabie in that sense represented a bridge between the ritual performance of writing a prayer on an *ema* tablet, and the playful performance of drawing on these offerings. The ema boards here also can be seen as similar to the community use of scales on local Amabie figures, as well, with people communicating with one another through a medium usually reserved for communication with the divine.

Again, in addition to the communal *ema* tablets where visitors collectively wrote their prayers, Hirota Shrine also sold small paper Amabie amulets visitors could buy and display in their homes. A small image of Amabie was distributed free of charge between March and June 2020, with the larger red and black version, stamped with the shrine's seal as pictured below, available for a small fee. The shrine said they started the distribution to make people feel even slightly safer.[53] When the shrine ceased distribution of the images, it noted on its website that it offered alternative methods for people to pray for the dispersion of the plague.[54]

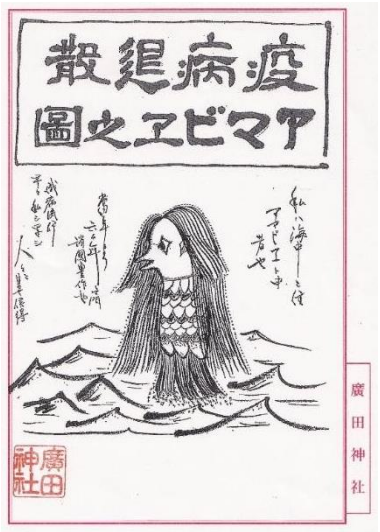


Image 21: Hirota Shrine amulet featuring Amabie and the words, "Expel the plague" (*ekibyō taisan*)

[53] Odagiri Moe, "Nishinomiya no jinja, Amabie gofu o haifu `sukoshi demo anshin dekiru mono wo'" [Distribution of Amabie amulets at a shrine in Nishinomiya: "something to help you feel even a little safer"]. Maga 17 April 2020. Available online: https://www.lmaga.jp/news/2020/04/112416/, accessed on May 15, 2020.
[54] Hirota Shrine website news. Available online: http://www.hirotahonsya.or.jp/localpage/blog.html, accessed on May 15, 2020.

It is not only Hirota Shrine to feature a protective Amabie amulet. More recently, Kasuga Grand Shrine in Nara began selling a Pokémon and Amabie crossover: the designer of Pikachu, Nishida Atsuko, created an *ema* with an illustration of Amabie in the style of Pokémon art.[55] After the artist made an official offering of her work to the shrine, the *ema* were sold to the general public beginning in the fall of 2020. A newspaper article covered the sale, noting that Nishida chose to also represent a deer and use the colors of red and white to make the design specifically representative of Kasuga Grand Shrine, while the art itself was created in order to "make the viewer feel warm and comfortable". The article further quotes Nishida as elaborating: "It's the first time for me to make an offering to deities, and it was very refreshing. I'd like for children to become energetic and cheerful."[56]

Scarlet and white colors in Japan are often associated Shinto ritual practices. From ancient times, white has been a color associated with "purity and cleanliness", and has been a sacred color since ancient times.[57] Scarlet is one of the oldest pigments in Japan; representing the sun, it is typically used "as a symbol of authority in Shinto events and celebrations."[58] The color combination is used frequently in shrines and

[55] "Pikachu designer dedicates illustration of folklore character Amabie to west Japan shrine," *The Mainichi Shimbun*, 11 October 2020. Accessed 27 October 2020: https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20201009/p2a/00m/0et/023000c
[56] "Pikachu designer dedicates illustration of folklore character Amabie to west Japan shrine." The Mainichi Shimbun. 11 October 2020. Available online: https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20201009/p2a/00m/0et/023000c
[57] Yumioka, Katsumi, Kimono to Nihon no iro-kimono de tsuzuru Nihon dentō shoku [Kimono and the Colors of apan], second edition. Tokyo: Pie Books, 2007: 201.
[58] *Ibid.,* 14.

during Shinto festivals, giving this particular Amabie a stronger spiritual connection to the Shinto shrine.



Image 22 and 23: Amabie *ema* by Nishida Atsuko
at Kasuga Grand Shrine, November 20, 2020.
Images by author.

In addition to the appearance of Amabie at shrines, Amabie also became the subject of a new Noh drama. The play was written by Ueda Atsushi and performed by Ohtsuki Noh troupe, which is active in the Kansai area of Japan. The play draws on the traditional Noh repertoire, in particular a piece called *Shōjō.*[59] The *shōjō* is a mythical beast

[59] Monga Mieko and Ueda Atsushi, "Konna kibishi yo no naka dakara koso Noh wo enjiru koto ga Nohgakushi no tsutome da to omou" [Because it is such a harsh world, it is the duty of the Noh artist to perform Noh," in: *Kai to Yū* [Unknowns and Spirits] vol. 007, 27 April 2021: 376.

that is described in Chinese and Japanese folklore as an ape-like humanoid creature. The Noh play features a man who is visited in a dream and advised to open a liquor stall at a local market. A mysterious customer appeared regularly before revealing himself to the stall owner as a *shōjō* who lived in the ocean. The stall owner went to the beach to meet the *shōjō*, who presented him with an ever-flowing liquor pot as a gift. Later, however, it is revealed that this all happened in a dream of the stall owner.

Ueda drew inspiration for the Noh drama *Amabie* clearly from this earlier piece, and parallels can be seen in the plot summary that accompanies a public performance of the piece. Driven in part by a desire to share the performance with people while Japan was still asking people to adhere to social distancing, a video of the performance and an English summary of the story were made available on the troupe's YouTube channel.[60] The English summary gives a thorough outline of the performance, which I quote at length:

> "Amabie," a Noh drama that is a "prayer for the end of coronavirus." Summary narration: "This story is set in a world where coronavirus has already disappeared…. A public servant from the imperial court appears and talks about the plague and its end. He says, not so long ago, the plague spreaded [sic] throughout the world and people's hearts and minds were overpowered by the threat of the virus. One night a strange creature appeared to the servant in his

[60] *Amabie* Noh drama on Youtube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-okw1gDZVDA&t=6s The English summary is available here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5jvQ5G1tynk&t=1s

dreams. This creature called itself Amabie, sent by Poseidon and Amabie gave him the message of overcoming the plague. Amabie told him to draw a duplicate of Amabie's likeness and to make it known throughout the world. The servant went about doing as Amabie requested, then, as if by magic, the plague gradually began to subside and finally ceased. He decided to get the people together to offer thanks and perform a sacred dance for Amabie. Soon attracted by the ceremony, Amabie appears with long black hair and polished scales, on three legs, from the ocean. Amabie tells the people once again to draw and share its image and starts dancing and chanting to the music. After dancing, Amabie leaves a message for us. Since the beginning of time, suffering has been all around us. In spite of this, we see the beautiful sight of those who are not swayed by slander, never abuse others, and are pure of heart. Amabie will always be with the people as a savior from this day forward. After these words, Amabie finally goes back into the ocean. So in Japan, this old, strange creature Amabie can be found from folk materials of Edo period which is about two hundred or three hundred years ago. And today, it regained the spotlight as a symbolic figure of charm against coronavirus. So, according to Amabie's message, we Otsuki Noh Theater, decided to share its image by the performance of a Noh play."[61]

At the same time, Ueda has made clear that the current global pandemic and the online Amabie boom was also an inspiration not only in the performance but in its delivery as well. The play was written as "a prayer for the end of the

[61] *Amabie English Outline* on Youtube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5jvQ5G1tynk&t=1s

corona crisis. It introduces a *yūgen* performance that contains a prayer for the dispersion of disease and a long life free of sickness."[62] Ueda also says he set it in the future, when the illness has already disappeared, in part because, "it isn't the plague itself, but the raging spirits of those who have faced hardship that plant the seeds of hatred and conflict."[63] This is why Amabie's message is about the importance of living with purity of spirit - a message that Ueda admits he took liberties with in order to stress the psychological impact of the pandemic. For him, the ability to assuage troubled spirits is the power of religious expression of Noh.[64]

There are a few additional points of interest simply in this outline. First, the evocation of Poseidon as a deity reflects the blending the Japanese *yōkai* lore informing this Noh play with Greek mythology:

> Subtitles: "One night, an apparition appeared to me in a dream and spoke these words: I am Amabie sent by Poseidon to offer you a spell capable of abolishing the deadly plague. For if you do, all evil will fear me and withdraw from this place. Now, I grant you the oracle of relief. Then, folks, keep the image of me in your mind."[65]

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[62] Monga Mieko and Ueda Atsushi, "Konna kibishi yo no naka dakara koso Noh wo enjiru koto ga Nohgakushi no tsutome da to omou" [Because it is such a harsh world, it is the duty of the Noh artist to perform Noh," in: *Kai to Yū* [Unknowns and Spirits] vol. 007, 27 April 2021: 376.
[63] Monga and Ueda, 377.
[64] Monga and Ueda, 377.
[65] *Amabie* Noh Performance. Available online; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5jvQ5G1tynk&t=1s

Amabie is truly a global messenger in this play, and Ueda notes this was intentional on his part, stating there is no precedent for this mixing of Western and Japanese mythology to create a universal message. He notes that it is precisely the lack of resources about the mythical Amabie character that makes this form of play possible in Noh as well as popular culture.[66]

### 6. Amabie as Commodity Play

In addition to the appearance of Amabie as a way to bolster community and in religious spaces, Amabie has also been commodified in every way imaginable. She has appeared on the labels of beer, wine, and sake; she is used on cookies and other sweets; she appears on masks, stickers, and notepads. Artists create their own Amabie and offer their creations for sale online. In the ultimate symbol of Japanese commodification, Japan's powerful source of what Christine Yano has called "pink globalization", Hello Kitty has appeared with Amabie in a marketing campaign for snacks.

But perhaps the most striking, localized use of Amabie around Kansai has been in the creation of Amabie goods that are sold in tourist spots that have seen business plumet since the start of the pandemic. In areas around Kyoto, Osaka, and Kobe, Amabie has been packaged and marketed to help recover some of the income lost with decreased tourism.

For example, the city of Nara is one of the ancient capitals of Japan, famous primarily for its temples and its deer. Souvenirs that are sold in shops typically feature images

[66] Monga and Ueda, 377.

of deer or other local points of interest, but in the fall of 2020, many shops were selling souvenirs whose packaging featured Amabie, as seen in Fig. 24 below.


Fig 24. Souvenirs at Nara packed in Amabie wrappers. Image by author.

In addition to packaging souvenir treats, Amabie was also used to remind visitors to wear masks and practice social distancing; if a visitor had forgotten a mask or if their mask required refreshing, masks, mask spray, disinfectants, and other supplies were sold in the gift shop. The display of these goods prominently featured a picture of Amabie, as seen in Fig. 25.


Fig. 25. Masks and mask sprays available for sale in a gift shop in Nara. Image by author.

Perhaps the city in Japan hit the hardest by the lack of tourists in 2020-2021 has been Kyoto. And like Nara, Kyoto has also used Amabie in their city during the pandemic. In the fall of 2020, one of Kyoto's shopping plazas prominently displayed an Amabie banner featuring the phrase most associated with her appearance, "Dispel the plague!" while also reminding guests to use their "Corona manners".


Fig. 26. Amabie banner on display in Kyoto in fall 2020. Photograph courtesy of Dr. James Welker.

And like Nara, again, Amabie appeared on numerous souvenirs in gift shops across Kyoto, from high-end silk embroidery pieces, to cookies, to T-shirts, as seen in Fig. 27-29.



Fig. 27, 28: T-shirts and cookies for sale at a gift shop in Kyoto, spring 2021. Image by author.


Fig 29, Amabie-branded Yatsuhashi, a traditional Kyoto snack, fall 2020. Photograph courtesy of Dr. James Welker.

While it is easy to be cynical about the commodification of Amabie and the sale of tourist souvenirs blazoned with her image, her use in advertising can also be seen as a kind of play, of companies engaging with popular culture as they attempt to recover from some of the economic damages of the COVID-19 pandemic.

## 7. Conclusion

Amabie has exploded across the Japanese popular culture landscape during the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper has introduced just a small fraction of the ways in which Amabie has appeared in public spaces in Kansai, Japan, during the 2020-2021 novel coronavirus pandemic. Broadly speaking, her image is used in a spirit of play and appears in three areas of daily life: community spaces, religious spaces, and commodified spaces. For many, Amabie has become a symbol of a way to cope, not with the physical effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, but with the psychological effects it has had. The ambiguous and dubious origins and documentation of Amabie as a historical *yōkai* have meant she is open to any interpretation and can be adapted in the spirit of play to many different circumstances. For many, Amabie has been a way to play and find relief from stressful and difficult times. Perhaps, the message of overcoming difficulties and bringing people together will be Amabie's enduring legacy in the Japanese pop culture landscape.

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