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GODS, ANCESTORS AND MEDIATORS:
A COSMOLOGY FROM THE
SOUTHWESTERN ARCHIPELAGO OF JAPAN

My aim in this article is to describe and analyse certain Japanese notions—such as that of the other world, ideas about the snake hana and about certain plants (pampas-grass and beans), and the image of a supernatural monster—current among the inhabitants of the Nanzei Shoto (Southwestern Archipelago), particularly of the Amami Islands. While the notion of the other world has been investigated in Okinawa (see, for example, Origuchi 1955a, 1955b, 1976; Ogo 1966), its status in Tokunoshima, one of the Amami Islands, has been hardly documented—although Kreiner has reported (1971) with regard to the idea of the other world in Kakeroma, another of the Amami Islands. Native ideas of hana, of supernatural monsters, and of plants have been given least attention by previous scholars. While my own emphasis here is placed upon the native point of view, interpretations independent of the people’s own explanations are also attempted for certain phenomena.

This paper is a modified English version of one that I originally published in Japanese, entitled “Notes on the Symbolic Interpretation of Cosmology: Folk Ideas in the Amami Islands,” in the Research Bulletin of Liberal Arts (University of Tokyo, Faculty of General Education), Vol. XV (1983), pp. 1–31. I wish to thank Jooy Henri for her invitation to the Conference on the Social Anthropology of Japan, held in Oxford in 1984. I am also grateful to her for revising the English style and supplying helpful comments which are incorporated in this paper. A summarized English version of the original paper was presented in a seminar at the Nissan Institute of Japanese Studies, Oxford, in January 1985. I also wish to thank Itabashi Suki, Nanbu Kaneo, Shinkawa Takuma, and Kanai Youko, with whom fieldwork was often jointly undertaken. Fieldwork was funded from the Scientific Research Fund of the Ministry of Education in Japan as part of a joint research programme on Japanese shamanism whose representative was Professor Ogushi Ichi, and of my own research project in 1978, 1979 and 1981.
The Notion of Neira: The World Beyond the Sea

Among the inhabitants of the Amami Islands the notion of a world located far beyond the sea, variously called neiya, neira, mira or mira (miru or miri-kami in Okinawa), exists even today.

It is a ritual called hamaori (descent to the beach), annually performed in the island of Tokunoshima, that this notion of neira is most clearly revealed. The ritual is performed almost every village on the island, and as in most other festivals and rituals in the Amami and Okinawa Islands, it is performed according to the old (lunar) calendar. It takes place on three days after the (the festival honouring the ancestors) namely, kama (elder of fire), kama (younger of fire) and kama (elder of the earth). On the first day several groups of patrilineally related families construct their own hut in which they place three stones in the shape of a 'U' to make a kama, or oven. It is said that this first day of the ritual is devoted to inviting ancestors to the beach to make them feel comfortable. On the second day the members of each group gather in their festijn hut and eat and drink together after offering food on the kama to their ancestors. Although several years ago the actual construction of huts ceased, they still gather on the beach and build the oven on the day of kama. On this day they perform a rite called mishima-funashi (misima-funashi in standard Japanese, i.e. stepping on the new beach). The rite consists of tossing the beach babies that have been born since the last hamaori of the previous year to make them take their first steps on the sand of the beach. They are said to do this in order to inform the ancestors of the arrival of the babies to their descendents, and to bring protection from them. The people then enter the sea and splash water three times towards the god of the sea. They then purify themselves by splashing water over themselves, with the prayer 'We came here today for the ritual of hamaori. Please accept our offerings.' On the third day ama wrestling or bull-fights are performed on the beach.

Several notions are involved in the ritual of hamaori. With regard to its purpose, old informants in Tokunoshima state that it is performed once a year for the purpose of praying to the ancestors for a good harvest through pleasing them on the beach. It is also said that hamaori is a ritual for the ancestors who died more than thirty-three years ago. In many southwestern parts of Japan the 33rd anniversary is customary the last occasion on which the Japanese honour their ancestors. However, in Amami this occasion is not the last for those ancestors who died earlier are also remembered in this ritual of hamaori. It seems that they are annually worshiped deceased relatives and ancestors who died during the period of thirty-three years on the occasion of the ban festival.

In the village of Kaneku in Tokunoshima there exists a legend concerning the origins of the hamaori ritual. It had been customary for the inhabitants to spread harvested ears of rice on the beach for two days before threshing. On one occasion a typhoon washed them all away. The villagers grieved at the loss of their rice. However, when they came to the beach afterwards, they found, to their surprise, that all the ears of rice had been returned to the beach, pushed back by the sea. Since then they began worshipping the god of the sea, who, they thought, had been responsible for returning the rice to them—hence, according to the villagers, the beginning of the ritual of hamaori.

Thus the ritual of hamaori is practiced to welcome the ancestors and to worship the god of the sea as the god of rice. The latter implies that a feature of the ritual is the celebration of a good harvest. Indeed, some informants from the island said that those ancestors that are prayed to during the ritual of hamaori would come from the other world of abundance called neira or mira. The offering of food above an emmi made of three stones on the beach is said to be for the purpose of expressing gratitude to the ancestors for a good harvest, and of praying for another good harvest the following year.

The hamaori ritual is thus directed towards the ancestors in order to secure a good harvest as well as the protection of their descendents, and to express gratitude to the god of the sea and to the gods of neira, as the god of rice. Praying in front of the stone oven is directed not only to the ancestors but also to the god of fire.

In villages on the island of Iheya in Okinawa, when a wife dies, the oven-hearth (kama) of her house is destroyed and abandoned. After the shidai (incense burning), on the 40th day which follows the death, an auspicious day is chosen to go to the beach to look for three proper stones to worship as sacred objects of the god of the oven or god of fire. In all the houses in Iheya, the god of the oven called okama-ganashii is worshipped in the kitchen located in the northwestern part of the house. The three stones are sacred objects which are said to come from miri-kami, equivalent to neira in Tokunoshima, located far beyond the sea. For this reason beach sand—sometimes seaweed—is scattered around the oven.

Accordingly, miri or miri-kami is on the one hand conceived by the inhabitants of Amami and Okinawa as the world of their ancestors; on the other hand, it is the world from which rice and fire are brought to people (Mabuchi 1980).

Moreover, evil things such as illness and misfortune are also thought to be brought from miri. Some scholars think that miri as a source of misfortune is older and has been transformed into a world of happiness; other scholars argue, on the contrary, that miri was a paradise which in turn became a world of evil. In both cases a linear development is presupposed, but with little evidence. It seems that miri is rather to be regarded as a world possessing the ambiguous characteristics of evil as well as of good, of misfortune as well as happiness.

Yet in the island of Tokunoshima the tendency exists to think of the neira rather as a paradise, where there live those ancestors who passed away more than thirty-three years ago, than as an evil world. In the village of Inakawa, located on the east coast of the island, they burn the leaves of a tree called shihi (Shihia stenboldi) on the 33rd anniversary of a death, and the spirit of the dead is then supposed to ascend to the sky along with the smoke from the leaves, to join the ancestors in the
world of neta beyond the sea. In the village of Matsubara, located on the west coast of the island, they have a similar custom, following the same idea, where the soul is conceived of as making a journey along the line of a parabola.

The notion of neta seems to be closely connected with the idea that a man or certain creatures (such as dolphins or whales) or objects floating in from the sea are regarded as sacred things which can bring about happiness. This idea can be seen in a legend told by contemporary inhabitants of the village of Inakawa concerning a shrine called Togobashi. As I have noted elsewhere (Yoshida 1961), the motif in this legend—namely, that a man who treats a stranger with warm hospitality will gain happiness—can be found in several ancient folk-tales in Japan. For example, a rich man who refuses to allow a beggar-priest to stay in his house becomes poor, whereas a poor man who offers lodging to the priest becomes wealthy. Such a motif can be found in the folk-tales concerning Kōbō Daishi. A similar notion with regard to the stranger is also found in ancient Greece, where there existed a belief that the gods often visit cities in the guise of strangers from afar. Mystical notions about strangers can also be found in Africa and elsewhere (Fortes 1935; Maloney 1976).

It is illustrated clearly in the legend of Togobashi that objects from the sea (associated with neta or neta) may be regarded as sacred things. This notion is also found in ideas about parias (shamanin in Okinawa; literally, objects which arrived); the custom of collecting things which came from the sea in order to worship them is widely distributed among the coastal areas of the Japanese islands, and these objects are often worshipped as the god Ebiu. In addition to what can be called the horizontal movement of the divinities deriving from neta or neta-kami located in the remote sea, below the sea, or in the bottom of the earth, we should also recognize the vertical movement of the celestial divinities associated with the cult of nokki (a cult dedicated to the mountains or the forests considered sacred).

The Snake Habu, Messenger of the Other World

According to folk notions in Amami and Okinawa, certain animals and plants are intermediaries between this world of reality and the other, supernatural world. In this region in general the habu (Tarentola flavipalpis) is considered a messenger of the gods and the ancestors. The snake is feared as it is poisonous, and unless its bite is immediately treated with a serum injection, it will normally cause death. To dream about a habu is considered a sign that someone will die in the near future. Being bitten by a habu is believed to be a mystical punishment (habu-atarai) by some supernatural being, such as an ancestor or other deity. The punishment occurs because one has neglected ancestor worship, or defiled certain sacred things, or done some other thing to anger the gods.

Since a bite by a habu implies some mystical involvement, people consult a yata (shaman or medium) to discover the reason for the bite, and act according to the instructions given by the yata. Several years ago Mr Matsuyama Mutsuhide in Tokunoshima was bitten on the heel by a habu in his garden, and had to be hospitalized (Matsuyama 1977). One old woman from his village visited him in the hospital and told him that she could not understand why a good man like him had been bitten by a habu. However, his mother immediately went to consult a yata, who told her that the bite was caused because her son had defiled something sacred. According to her report, her son soon realized that he had unwittingly moved a stone to use as part of a hand-base for a toilet, but the stone had formerly been brought into the garden from the sea by one of his ancestors (as described above, a stone from the sea is considered sacred because of its association with the neta).

The habu also possesses positive attributes. If one saves the life of a habu instead of killing it, one will be protected from accidents involving fire.

The times when a habu is believed to appear are fixed, and they are liminal in character: viz., in the yens (twilight), at the yama-ata (midnight) and in the akatsuki (dawn). Twilight and dawn are both liminal hours between day and night, and midnight is the turning-point of day to the next.

The habu is not only a messenger of the other world, but a deity of water and is often considered to be the master of Mount Ude in Tokunoshima. In this mountain villagers refrain from killing habu, because they are thought to be mystical punished if they kill one. People say that habu bite those who are impure—because of their attendance at funeral ceremonies or because of a death among their relatives—if they enter the mountain. This impurity due to death continues for seven days. Habu exist in other mountains or hills as well, and they do not permit such 'impure' people to enter. Neither do they like the menstrual pollution of women.

Because the habu transmits messages of the other world to human beings, it plays the role of mediator between this world and the other. One of the names given to the habu is apukabucho mirena. Apukabucho means 'decorated with beautiful designs', and is an admirable quality of the skin of the habu, and mirena means 'beautiful girl' (Matsuyama 1977). This comparison of the habu with a young girl is possibly due to its role of mediator between this world and the other world, because such a role is often symbolically associated with women. In the Amami and Okinawan Islands most women are traditionally priestesses for public rituals. In assuming the role of mediator, the habu bites men in order to let them know that the worship addressed to the god of water is not sufficient, that the cult of the ancestors has been neglected, that a tree has been cut down in a sacred place, that a sacred stone has been defiled or polluted, or that a house has not been properly built according to the relevant directions.

Besides the habu, various other living beings may play the role of mediator—including birds, in particular crows and butterflies. In Izena Island, Okinawa, rats are considered messengers sent from the nari world. Also a tree called habu in Okinawa and Amami (hirô in standard Japanese; Liriodendron chinensis var. subglosa) is believed to be a temporary residence of the gods, and similarly the shô (Ficus nitida) and gajewa (Ficus retusa) trees are inhabited by monsters called hooma (see next section). The sashiki (Mischnanthus sinensis), the yomogi (Artemisia
The Monster Kenman

Beliefs in various kinds of supernatural monsters used to be widespread among villagers in Japan. For instance, the red bean (azuki) is associated with one such supernatural being, who was supposed to produce noises by washing these beans in hollows in the countryside. It is said that when strange noises like the washing of beans are heard as one passes a stream or dale in mountainous areas at dusk, the noises are made by an old ‘red bean’ woman (azuki baka). In Sakunug, Nagano Prefecture, she was also believed to live in an empty house and sing a song which ran, ‘Shall I wash red beans or eat a man?’

In the Amami Islands a belief in the supernatural monster called kenman has survived to this day. In the mainland of Amami, as well as in Tokunoshima, this monster, conceived of as being male, is said to be covered with red hair, short like a child, with a long trunk, and short legs, and to salivate; while elsewhere it is also said that the kenman has legs longer than his trunk when squatting. In Omona, in Tokunoshima, it is said that the kenman wears leaves of a tree and for this reason looks as if he is wearing a kimono of kasuri (splashed patterns). According to traditional beliefs, the kenman sleeps in the hollow of a dead tree, and is often found on the banks of rivers, on the boundaries between the village and the beach, in caves on the beach, in shallows, in akō or gajumaru trees, in the bush, and at crossroads; he is also said to walk around at night in the shallows at low tide, carrying a lamp.

A man who happens to look at a kenman is said to get a fever. He then gets lost in the mountains and cannot find his way home; his eyes become bloodshot and he sometimes falls unconscious. According to an informant from the village of Kinen, Tokunoshima, when a girl disappeared years ago, villagers searched for her for three days until they found her unconscious in the mountains; they beat her with bark from a tree to bring her back to consciousness. She then told the villagers that she had been deceived by a kenman, and vomited what she had eaten; it all consisted of meal, which traditionally were not considered food for human beings. It is said that what a kenman offers to men appears to be delicious, but in reality it is nothing but horse dung or snails.

According to the folkloreists Ebara Yoshimori in Nase and Matsuyama Mitsuhide in Tokunoshima, the kenman is not ‘a monster of hairs’ (ke no mono) but ‘a monster of trees’ (ki no mono), where man is a dialect version of mono in standard Japanese referring to a spirit or supernatural being (personal communication). This monster corresponds to the kijinman of villages in Iheya, the northernmost island of Okinawa. The kijinman is also believed to be a spirit of trees, and is called ake-kanajo because his body is covered with red hair (Moromi 1951: 59).

In spite of the notion of the kenman and the kijinman as spirits of trees, they are also believed to walk in the shallow waters of the sea at night, carrying a lamp. It is said that if fishermen in the shallows find their lamp going out and unwittingly ask a kenman or kijinman for a light, they may get drowned by the monsters. On the island of Iheya the kijinman is believed to dislike and fear octopuses. An informant told me of an instance in which a man who was frightened by a kijinman in the shallow water at night threw an octopus at him. In anger, the kijinman tried to kill him, but the man narrowly escaped.

Inhabitants of the west coast of the mainland of Amami say that the body of the kenman is covered with red hair, but the hair on his head is grey, and his face has neither ears, nor eyebrows. According to a local published report, one man saw two kenman with hanging testicles and with plates on their heads; he told villagers later that when the kenman squatted, their legs appeared so long that their knees were over their heads. The man died afterwards because, it is said, he was mysteriously ‘defeated’ by the kenman just by looking at them (Setouchichō Editorial Committee 1977: 394 498).

However, while kenman often harm people, they have benevolent aspects as well. In Kasarikō on the main island of Amami, and elsewhere, it is said that fishermen have a good catch in the sea when they become friends of kenman; they also say that the fish a kenman catches for his friends in this way have only one eye because he eats the other eye of the fish but does not eat the meat.

The kenman, who has thus an amphibious character, is sometimes identified with the kappu, a monster legendary in the mainland of Japan, a spirit of the water, who is said to drown people swimming in rivers by pulling at their legs. In Kikaijima, the northernmost island of the Amami chain, I found that the word kenman is known, but is usually referred to locally by the term gosō. It is said that they live in a freshwater pond connected with the sea. Unlike the kappu in the mainland, the gosō shares characteristics with the kenman in living also in the gajumaru trees.

Like other supernatural monsters in Japan, such as oni (half-man/half-beast) and tengū (half-man/half-bird), kenman is said to be like a human child, yet a half-beast covered with red hair.

Many peoples in the world attribute mystical qualities to certain animals. One of the explanations why certain animals are endowed with mystical qualities is that they seem to have anomalous characteristics to the people concerned: for example, the pangolin in Ile culture (Douglas 1966), the cassowary in Karam (Bulmer 1967), the casuarius in Nusaulu (Ellen 1972), etc. Furthermore, people tend to create imaginary monsters such as the unilateral figure (Needham 1960) and the Japanese monsters discussed above. In this context then, it is interesting to note the deformity associated with the kenman; in one oral tradition, as mentioned above, he has neither eyes nor brows nor ears. Also, the kenman eats only one eye of a fish but leaves the meat intact. The kenman is not explicitly said to be left-handed but it is associated with left-handedness. In Tokunoshima they say that one should bite the forefinger of one’s left hand in order to escape from the kenman.
because he is said to carry away a man or woman by pulling his or her left hand, and he would then let it go. Moreover, in order to cure the victims of kemen, they tie a ‘left rope’ (kediri-mala)—that is, a rope made by twisting strands in the opposite way to usual—to an old tree, in which the kemen is supposed to live. Similarly, when an eye disease is attributed to a kemen, they stretch a ‘left rope’ around a guaiamar tree—a tree in which a kemen is also believed to live.

The magical power of the ‘left rope’ is used by villagers in Tokunoshima also for other purposes; for example, at a funeral those who carry the coffin from a house to the village graveyard customarily protect themselves from the spirit of the dead by tucking up their sleeves with a ‘left rope’. Also, when domestic animals become ill, a ‘left rope’ is tied round the cowshed to prevent evil spirits from entering. Formerly, when it thundered, people tried to protect themselves by hanging a ‘left rope’ made of pieces of clothes under the eaves of the house. On a day designated for ‘destroying insects’ the owners of rice-fields used to place a ‘left knot’ made of suzuki (Miscanthus sinensis) in the opening of the irrigation channel for the fields. It is also said in Tokunoshima that one can defeat a kemen in zama wrestling if one ‘wrestles with the left’ (left hand under the enemy’s arm pit) (Ogasawara 1972: 583-4).

Thus it seems that the left principle is endowed with the magical power to drive out the kemen just as the ‘left rope’ and the suzuki, or pieces of cloth tied in a ‘left knot’, are used to expel the spirits of the dead or evil spirits. It is also often found in other cultures that the left hand is used for some magico-religious purposes (Needham 1966, 1973; Goody 1962: 111; Vogt 1969: 419; and see also Matsumaga, in this volume).

Symbolic reversals are often considered effective in driving out evil. Thus in Onomawaka, Tokunoshima, in order to avoid harm from the kemen, men take off their loin-cloths and tie them around their heads.

The hypothesis that animals which violate spatial boundaries tend to be endowed with mystical powers (Douglas 1966; Tambiah 1969) is also relevant here because of the ‘ambivalent’ character of the kemen, inasmuch as they wander around in the sea as well as in the trees and mountains, and the way the supernatural monster is associated with both spatial and temporal boundaries. It will be recalled that the places where the kemen is likely to appear include village boundaries, crossroads, and a freshwater pond where the sea-water comes in at high tide. Furthermore, just as the ‘red bean’ woman and other monsters are believed to appear in the evening dusk, the kemen is said to be most likely to appear at twilight. In Matsubara, Tokunoshima, people say that it is most likely to be about in the twilight of rainy days.

Similar situations associating the dusk of the evening with supernatural monsters or evil spirits exist in Bali and in Malaysia. The dusk of the evening is called Bali sahab kala, and sahab meaning ‘joint’ or ‘knot’ and kala meaning evil spirits or ‘time’ (Howe 1964). Possibly it refers to the time between day and night. In the Amami Islands twilight or dusk is called saseki (nigata in standard Japanese). People there say that during this time one should not visit tombs, nor weave or cut clothes, and that childbirth at this time of the day is not allowed. They also say that it is at this time that the human soul (maburi) is likely to go out, so that it is better not to walk on the street at twilight. It is also advised that young girls should not go out at this time of day because they are particularly likely to encounter manasam (supernatural monsters) and misidumase (ugly monsters without ears) during twilight.

As mentioned earlier, kemen is a red monster. Hikim in Okinawa is called akeke, in which akeke denotes ‘red’, because his body is covered with red hair. While the colour red in the Japanese mainland is used as a good, auspicious colour, in both Okinawa and Amami, however, red is not a good colour. According to Toyama Junichi, in Okinawa, while the colour blue is a symbol of life, red expresses ageing, old age and death. Thus it is no surprise that the colour of the kemen’s body is red.

The Suzuki and the Bean

The suzuki is called sakaki, aden or adaha in Amami. The suzuki generally plays an important ritual role in the southwestern archipelago. For example, in Amami, for the sake of a safe childbirth, a suzuki used to be placed underneath the bed of a woman during her confinement. In Tokunoshima, in the ritual described earlier for expelling insects, a knot of ‘left-tied’ suzuki is placed on the edge of an irrigation ditch. Its effectiveness may be attributed to the ‘left tie’ used, but the suzuki itself is also supposed to have mystical powers.

Among the rites still performed today in Kikaijima there is a ritual called shihasa, in which people pray for the health and growth of children of one to twelve years. It is performed in August on a prescribed day of the lunar calendar. Five suzuki are prepared for boys or girls, seven for the girl of seven and a son. Early in the morning their parents or grandparents take them to a pond or well, dip the suzuki in the water, and shake the drops extracted over the children, saying ‘Get bigger quickly!’ (Oki nare tane). After this, a number of stones equal to the age of the child is collected from the pond, wrapped in the suzuki, and brought home. The stones are later placed in the domestic shrine (kanidana).

In Kikaijima there is another ritual in August called shikinita. This involves ancestor worship in which flowers are placed on the surface of the tombs, swept beforehand by some suzuki, and then suzuki are placed in the four corners of the house, on both sides of the gate, and beside the well, for the purpose of expelling evil spirits.

In Setouchi-cho, Amami Oshima, on the day of the shihasa, the suzuki is first placed on the four corners of the roof and also of the rice-fields. The purpose of this is said to be to purify the houses and fields and to expel evil spirits. The day of shi-suzuki is also the day when people receive kusugashiti or kusunagashiti, ‘ancestors of the old time’. They are undoubtedly the ancestors who died more than thirty-three years ago. On this day straw and grasses are burnt so as to make the smoke
by which the ancestors are supposed to come down from the sky. The ancestors are said initially to have come from the toya, far beyond the sea, so that they are said to be wet and cold, and need to be made dry and warm by the fire. The suzuki are put together with the flowers in a vase in front of the ancestral tablets moved from their usual place to a room on the east side of the house (omote).

In Okinawa, on the day of shikinaichi, rice mixed with suzuki (red beans) is offered at the family altar, and the suzuki tied with branches of mulberry are planted in the caves to expel evil spirits. As Yanagita Kunio has remarked (1931: 457), 'just like the shichigosan (suzuki japonica), the suzuki...is fed by gods'.

On the one hand, the suzuki is used to expel evil spirits; on the other hand, it is used to invoke or summon up a spirit or soul of the dead. For example, there is a ritual in the Amami Islands called mahorimina, performed by the yuta (shaman). Generally, it is practised within the period of 40 days after a death—in general the 19th, 29th or 99th day—but certain shamans refuse to practise the rite before the 7th day, because during the period of seven days after a death the pollution caused by the death is said to be too strong. The ritual begins with the summoning of the soul (masun) of the deceased. The shaman calls the soul by reciting certain formulas, while holding the suzuki with a fan, then moving them in a circular fashion around his or her mouth. The yuta then invites the soul to inform his living relatives through his or her mouth of anything that might have failed to say when it was alive. The soul is supposed to possess the shaman, who then announces its wishes etc. as if the soul of the deceased itself were speaking.

After the departure of the soul which was possessing the yuta another rite takes place to expel the soul of the deceased. This consists of the symbolic act of cutting the air with a sword both inside and outside the house. Then the yuta scatters roasted soybean seeds (Glycine max soybean) which have thus become black. They say that just as the roasted beans will not germinate again, they throw them in order that the soul will never return.

Since it is believed that the souls of the living are inclined to leave with the soul of the dead, the yuta lightly strikes the head and shoulders of those present with the suzuki, in order to make the soul of the living stay firmly inside the body. The suzuki is used to call up not only the soul of the dead, but also the souls of the living. It is believed in the Amami and Okinawa Islands that the souls of the living may escape when a man is surprised or falls out of a tree. In Nae City, Amami, the ritual performed by the yuta to call back the lost soul to its body is called mahorimina (to invite a soul), while in Okinawa this is called mahorimina. In this ritual the role of the mahorimina is again important. In Okinawa the yuta holds the blades of suzuki to call back the lost soul. She moves the gen (ring of suzuki) three times over the head of the patient whose soul is missing. Then the gen is hung on the wall of the room for a week. In Nae, while the soul of a patient is absent, the yuta places the suzuki beside the pillow of the patient, with the root directed towards the outside of the house and the leaves towards the inside. She also strokes the body of the patient with the suzuki while reciting formulas.

Thus in the case of the ritual of calling up a soul of the dead, the suzuki is first used to summon the soul of the deceased and is also used to hold the souls of the living at the time of expelling the soul of the dead. In the case of the mahorimina ritual, the suzuki is again used to bring back the soul of a living being who is suffering from absence of the soul. In the context of the shikinaichi, the suzuki is used to pray for the health and growth of children. In the Amami and Okinawa Islands, the suzuki is placed not only in the ritual of shikinaichi, but also in a new house, in a vacant house from which a family has moved out, and beside a new well for the purpose of expelling evil spirits. At funerals the suzuki is placed on a coffin also to expel evil spirits.

In the last phase of the ritual of mahorimina, while roasted soy bean seeds are thrown—with the idea that, since the roasted black soy bean will never germinate, the dead will never return—the suzuki is used to hold in the souls of the living. Thus the roasted soy bean may be opposed to the suzuki in this context, so that if the soy bean seeds are situated on the side of the dead, the suzuki can be placed on the side of the living (cf. Lévi-Strauss 1979; 1983: 271).

The suzuki is thus used not only to invite back the souls of the dead, but also to help growing children, to call back the souls of the living, and to expel evil spirits. Why is this so? As Lévi-Strauss noted in his recent book (1983: 271–2), the mystical nature of the suzuki may stem from its enormous strength of growth in a wilderness. Note that in festivals in the Japanese archipelago the suzuki is often used in place of the rice plant—a fact which may be related to the resemblance between the two plants; certainly the suzuki belongs to the rice family.

Whereas the suzuki was originally confined to the Far East, the geographical distribution of beans is very wide. The soy bean seems to have originated in north China, but was already cultivated in Japan in the Yayoi period (300 BC to AD 300). The custom of expelling evil spirits on the day of setsubun (the eve of the beginning of spring) by throwing out roasted soy bean seeds and reciting 'happiness be inside, demons be out!' still persists to this day. In some places in north Kyushu fishermen throw roasted soy bean seeds into the sea to calm a storm.

Besides the soy bean, magical and mystical powers are attributed to the red bean (Arachis angularis Ohwi). Archaeological evidence indicates that the red bean was eaten in the early period of the Jomon Culture (4000–300 BC). It is customary in Japan to cook rice with red beans on days of happy events. On January 15th, Japanese eat a grain of rice nuted with red beans. On the occasion of childbirth it is customary in certain places to eat muku (pounded rice) with a paste of sweet red beans. In certain areas people cook ricerice or rice gruel with red beans at the time of a journey or moving into a new house.

However, red beans are eaten not only on happy occasions, but also on unfortunate occasions: at funerals, for example, at the moment of placing a corpse in the coffin, the corpse relatives eat rice gruel and red beans, and again after the burial. (sweet) red beans. It can probably be concluded then that the red bean is eaten at a time of transition from one state to another: New Year, childbirth, departure on a journey, moving in and out, death. Moreover, the red bean was used because of its mystical powers to expel evil beings, the god of leprosy, foxes, rabbits, and wolves, by feeding them with it. Some scholars contend that the mystical nature of the red bean stems from its red colour, but taking into account the mystical power attributed to the soy bean itself, it is not the colour that should be treated as the main reason.
The Japanese thus customarily treat beans in notable ways, but the attribution of mystical powers to beans is not unique to Japanese culture. In ancient Greece, for example, the broad bean was either prohibited food among certain groups or else considered sacred. According to Deirne (1972: 56-100), in ancient Greece the bean was considered a mediator between this world and the other. Among northern and central American Indians a certain mystical nature is also attributed to the bean (Levi-Strauss 1983: 203-75). Of the Zinacantan Indians of Highland Chiapas, Mexico, Laughlin reports that 'if beans are mistreated their soul will cry and complain to the earth lord and to the gods in heaven, thus calling down famine upon mankind' (1975: 112).

In Japanese mythology the beans (soya and red beans) emerged from the genitalia of the goddess Ukemochi. According to one Japanese dictionary, the Japanese word for bean, 'ame, also in fact means genitalia, effloris, and woman. The symbolic association of the bean with woman is also found in other cultures. For example, the resemblance of the bean to the female sexual organ was also recognized in ancient Greece (Deirne: 1972: 97). Gossen notes that in the mythology of the Chamula, Tzotzil-speaking Maya Indians of the Central Highlands of Mexico, maize came from a piece of the (male) sun's groin and included a part of his pubic hair, which is the silk of the ear of maize, but the (female) moon gave potatoes (her breast milk) and beans (her necklace) (Gossen 1972: 145).

It seems clear then that the mystical notions associated with the bean—its ambiguous position as an intermediary between this world and the other, and its symbolic association with woman—are not unique to Japan. Yet the interrelation between these notions may have stronger force in the Japanese context, since, as Yang notes (1965: 14), it was customarily ordinary women in villages who played the magico-religious role of performing rituals as intermediaries between this world and the other.

In the Amami and Okinawa Islands, these women worked as farmers and housewives in daily life but performed various rituals as priestesses, clothed in white, for the welfare of their village. This pattern still persists to this day in certain villages in these islands. In the village of Tokuwasa in Tokunoshima the highest priestess amongst these 'divine women' (kaminushi) used to live in a house called ageti (related to the word ageti, meaning the sunrise or east). The ageti house is located on the eastern side of the nima house in which the founder of the village and his successors lived. The ageti and nima are situated in the highest place on the mountain side of the village, which is considered to be superior to the sea or lower side. The presence of these two houses illustrates the traditional political structure of the village, although it has ceased to operate at present. Formerly, the village was politically controlled from generation to generation by the head of the nima house, whereas one of his sisters who lived in the ageti house acted as the highest priestess, conducting the rituals and other religious affairs of the village. Theoretically, the position of secular leader was inherited by his son while the status of the priestess passed to one of the daughters of his brother, the leader of the village. The priestess never married and her successor was chosen from among the daughters of the secular leader. The political leader was called

irst (meaning 'brother'), and the priestess amari (meaning 'sister'). The iri was in charge of village politics, but he discharged his duties according to oracle interpreted by the broad bean. While in secular life the amari was under the protection of the iri, they had a complementary relationship (Mabuchi 1964). Dual sovereignty of this sort has also been found in Okinawa, well described by Torikoshi Kenzaburo in 1944.

Dual sovereignty is not practiced any more in these villages. However, notions underlying it still persist today. It was customary, for example, for Okinawans men, when leaving for a distant fishing trip or long journey, to take along with them a towel of their sister as an amulet. During World War II soldiers took along with them to the battlefield a 'thousand-stitch belt' (shimpo-buri), trowels, or hair of their sister as amulets. It was believed that brothers protect their sisters in secular life, while sisters extend their spiritual powers to protect their brothers (Mabuchi 1964).

Concluding Remarks

An analysis of the kamaori ritual performed in Tokunoshima reveals that the notion of ancestors is divided into two kinds: those ancestors who died more than thirty-three years ago and are supposed to live in the nima located far beyond the sea, and those who died during the period of thirty-three years. This division of the dead is clearly reflected in the plan of the house in the Okinawa Islands. In all houses on the island of Iheya it is always in the 'first' room on the east side of the house that more distant ancestors—identified with gods—are worshipped, while more recent ancestors are worshipped in the 'second' room, located on the western side of (and next to) the 'first' room. The distant ancestors are enshrined in an altar (kamihe) constructed on the northern side of the 'first' room, whereas the more recently deceased ancestors are represented by the shii (ancestral tablets) placed in a small altar (butsudan) situated on the northern side of the 'second' room.

It is the yud (who are believed to transmit messages from the ancestors to human beings. It is also the yud who serve as mediators between the living and other supernatural beings. Moreover, there exist certain animals and plants which are conceived to mediate between this world of reality and the other. We have seen that the hata snake, the suzuki and the bean are regarded as intermediaries between the two worlds, and that in a certain context the suzuki are situated rather on the side of life, whereas roasted soybeans are more on the side of the dead. A female yud states that in the ritual of summoning a soul of the dead, roasted soybeans are scattered both inside and outside the entrance to a house in order to help the soul or ghost enter the house more easily because it has no legs with which to walk. It is assumed here that a soul or ghost comes in sliding on the beans. As for the red bean, in so far as it is eaten in Japan at the times of New Year, departure on a journey, moving house, childbirth, and death,
one can probably safely state that it is connected with transition.

The notion of the *kennum or kiyomu* can only be understood in relation to the symbolic structures of the inhabitants of the Amami and Okinawa Islands.

While there exist cultural peculiarities in the ideas and practices associated with dual sovereignty in these islands, dual sovereignty of a similar kind is described in detail by Georges Dumézil for the ancient Indo-European peoples. He has shown that the gods Mitra and Varuna in India were the cosmological projection of the dual sovereignty which existed there; Mitra as legislator and Varuna as priest. Mitra represents this world and Varuna the other world (Dumézil 1948). Rodney Needham has shown the existence of a dual sovereignty among the Meru in east Africa in which the 'elder' corresponds to Mitra and the Magwe, high priest, is essentially equivalent to Varuna in ancient India (Needham 1960). Considering such comparative material, it is essential to understand the dual sovereignty and complex structure of the culture of the Amami and Okinawa Islands can be regarded as an example of such a classification of cultures.

What seems to be the most important of all is the possibility of a synthesis between a regional detailed study of the collective notions of a particular society and a global point of view covering vastly different areas (cf. Geertz 1975). It is essential to study the peculiarities and uniqueness of a culture. But at the same time we should not lose sight of the similarities between cultures.

REFERENCES


Japanese References

KAZUTO MATSUMOTO

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE LEFT HAND IN TWO TYPES OF RITUAL ACTIVITY IN A JAPANESE VILLAGE

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to present and interpret certain findings concerning the left hand in the context of worship at a Japanese village Shinto shrine and in funeral practices. I have found that the use of the left hand is significant in rituals at a Shinto shrine and also in Buddhist funeral practices at a village near Yame City in Fukuoka prefecture. Rituals performed at the shrine are considered pure by the villagers (who are all Buddhists), while the funeral practices are considered impure and polluting. In this sense, the two contradict each other. This is illustrated by the fact that members of a family in which a death has occurred neither visit the village shrine nor participate in any of its rituals for a year, because of the pollution caused by the death of the family member. In the first part of this paper, I will describe the use of the left hand, and in the second part I will offer an interpretation. This paper deals mainly with findings made at the village mentioned, but I will occasionally refer to data from other villages.

The main agricultural products of the village have traditionally been rice (rice cultivation begins in May or June and ends in October or November) and wheat (cultivated between November and May), although horticulture has recently been introduced also. There are 98 households in the village, with a population of

1. Left hand does not mean just 'hand' itself in this paper but also foot, as shown by Hertz (1966). Hertz also refers to 'foot' despite the title of his paper. Thus, for example (p. 105), 'A holy place must be entered right foot first. Sacred offerings are presented to the gods with the right hand.'