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Como/Weaving and Binding

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Introduction

AMONG THE MOST exciting developments in the study of Japanese religion over the past two decades has been the discovery of tens of thousands of ritual vessels, implements, and scapegoat dolls (bitogata) from the Nara (710–784) and early Heian (794–1185) periods. Because inscriptions on many of these items are clearly derived from Chinese rites of spirit pacification, it is now evident that both the Japanese royal system and the Japanese Buddhist tradition developed against a background of continental rituals centered upon the manipulation of yin and yang, animal sacrifice, and spirit-quieting. Thus in spite of the longstanding tendency to approach Japanese religion according to a bivalent Buddhist/Shintō model, it is now clear that continental rites of purification and exorcism constituted a third major force in the development of the religious institutions of the Nara period.

The proliferation of these rites in the Japanese islands, in turn, was almost certainly related to the adoption of the Chinese festival calendar, a process that was apparently underway by the time of the court of Suiko (reigned 592–628), as envoys from the Chinese empire and the kingdoms of the Korean peninsula helped accelerate the diffusion of continental political, cultural, and religious norms.1 As subsequent decades witnessed the accelerated transmission of Buddhism to the Japanese islands, they were also characterized by the rapid absorption of systems of knowledge based upon Chinese notions of medicine, astronomy, and ritual. This process was to influence virtually every aspect of court life for centuries to come.2

In light of the impressive number of continental-style effigies, ritual vessels, and clay figurines that have been unearthed, this book seeks to re-examine early Buddhist and “native” religious practice in the Japanese islands within the context of the rites, legends, and technologies associated with the Chinese festival calendar. Building upon recent archeological discoveries as well as textual sources, I chart the trajectory of this transformation in the religious culture through a study of the immigrant cults and deities that flourished during the Nara and early Heian periods.3
Throughout this work I argue that as the rites and legends of the Chinese festival calendar pervaded popular cultic practice across the Japanese islands, they also to a remarkable degree shaped the emerging Buddhist and royal traditions. By highlighting the revolutionary effect of continental systems of technology, science, and material culture upon cultic development across the Japanese islands, I suggest new readings for a series of myths and legends related to the Sun Goddess Amaterasu, the formation of the royal line, and the foundational narrative of the Buddhist tradition in the Japanese islands. As a result, a new picture of cultic life in the period emerges that emphasizes the importance of animal sacrifice, weaving cults, and Chinese conceptions of medicine and immortality.

Inherent in this project are three overarching goals that have shaped both the structure and content of the work. At the most basic level, I wish to draw attention to the importance of continental technologies and the Chinese festival calendar for the development of purportedly native cultic practices and belief systems. Because continental technologies related to sericulture, medicine, and metalworking were firmly embedded in continental ritual and conceptual frameworks, their transmission necessitated the simultaneous transmission and adoption of a body of rites and legends that were part of the basic fabric of popular cultic practice in the Chinese empire(s) and in the Korean kingdoms. By focusing upon the primarily immigrant lineages most closely associated with this process, I hope both to explicate the primary mechanisms of this cultural transmission and to clarify the nature of the transformation that it engendered. Thus the diffusion of sericulture not only required adoption of new technologies and modes of social organization, but it also required the adoption of cults focused on silkworm goddesses and astral deities such as the Weaver Maiden and the Queen Mother of the West. Similarly, the practice of Chinese medicine required not only knowledge of human anatomy, but also an understanding of the relationship between body and spirit predicated upon Chinese conceptions of yin and yang. I argue that as a cluster of service groups and immigrant lineages incorporated continental tropes and cultic practices within their own ancestral cults and legends, the rites and legends of the Chinese festival calendar came to be embedded within the fabric of ritual practice across the Japanese islands. As immigrant ancestral deities became inscribed in local landscapes, continental conceptions of immortality, spirit pacification, and animal sacrifice became ubiquitous across the spectrum of cultic practice at court and in the countryside.

These considerations are closely related to a second, equally important goal, which is to highlight the role of gender issues in the formation of
both economic and cultic systems during the period. Much of the narrative is devoted to the hitherto neglected consorts, shamanesses, goddesses, and female immortals who pervaded the cultic landscape of the Japanese islands. The cultic identity of these figures, I argue, was closely related to the proliferation of weaving and sericulture, two heavily gendered activities that featured prominently in the rites of the Chinese festival calendar. As silks and fabrics became the commodity of choice for everything from taxes to offerings to deities, weaving maidens cum female deities, ancestors, and immortals played a major role in defining the nature of what would come to be known as “native” Japanese religion. I further argue that as these figures came to be intertwined with the newly emerging royal cult, the tropes and legends of the Chinese festival calendar came to play a major role in the construction of the lineal and cultic basis of the royal cult.

Finally, I relate these developments to the emergence of the Japanese Buddhist tradition, which took root during this period. Although obvious instances of cultic influences from the Chinese festival calendar have often been dismissed as preexisting accretions of popular cultic practices within the Chinese Buddhist tradition, I argue that continental rites and legends are best understood as integral elements of the technological and material transformation that was sweeping the Japanese islands during the period. Focusing on a series of legends drawn from popular tale collections as well as from court-sponsored accounts of the founding legend of Japanese Buddhism, I further argue that continental conceptions of medicine, spirit-quieting, and even animal sacrifice shaped a new religious ideal that involved the use of drugs and ascetic practices in pursuit of immortality and mastery of the superhuman world.

**Iconoclasts and the Return of the Native**

Exploring each of these issues in turn entails unraveling a series of methodological difficulties that may be traced to the continued influence of nationalist discourse from Japan’s prewar period. One of the most important impediments has been an unspoken set of assumptions concerning a purportedly native Japanese identity that is closely associated either with the religious practices of the Japanese “folk” or with the Japanese royal house. In this view Buddhism was, by contrast, a “foreign” religion that was transformed as it gradually came to an accommodation with the “native” beliefs and practices associated with popular religious practice.

This paradigm is closely related to Meiji conceptions of the royal house as a central engine in the development of new cultic practices across the
Japanese islands. Because both the Nara and the prewar periods were
typified by rhetoric heralding a dramatic centralization and then expansion
of political power, Japanese rulers from the ancient period have almost
invariably been presented as sponsors of technological and cultic changes/
innovations to which local elites then responded. This has yielded a
tendency to treat purportedly native practices as rooted in an essentialized
Japanese identity, while the diffusion of “foreign” traditions has been seen
as resulting from the activities of a small coterie of literate courtiers familiar
with elite textual traditions from the continent.

These premises have greatly distorted our understanding of both
Buddhist and popular cultic practices during the formative period of the
Japanese Buddhist and royal traditions. A commitment to the category of
“native” religious beliefs and practices has become increasingly difficult to
sustain in recent years, however, in light of the large number of textual and
archaeological sources suggesting the clear influence of continental rites of
spirit pacification and animal sacrifice in the cultic life of the period. In
response to these developments, the traditional approach has in recent years
been challenged from two directions. Scholars such as Fukunaga Mitsuji,
Ueda Masaaki, Takigawa Masajirō, and Yoshino Hiroko have sparked heated
debate within Japan by suggesting that numerous aspects of the royal cult
and early “Shintō” were in fact Taoist in essence. By emphasizing numerous
instances in which cultic vocabulary found in Taoist sources was employed
within court chronicles and court-sponsored rites, the work of these scholars
represents an important breakthrough in the study of early Japanese religi-
ion. Criticisms by traditionalists angered at the thought of decoupling the
royal cult from the Shintō tradition have often proven to be unconvincing.

Unfortunately, the work of these scholars has proven to be vulnerable
to methodological criticism on numerous other grounds. They have been
distressingly vague if not silent on key questions concerning the actual
mechanisms of transmission and on the lack of Taoist institutions during
a period when Buddhist temples were being constructed with astonishing
rapidity. Perhaps most problematic, proponents of the belief that the Tao-
ist tradition flourished in the Japanese islands have also failed to provide
a clear account of how practices that they have labeled “Taoist” differ from
popular Chinese religious practices. At times one suspects that virtually
any aspect of Chinese popular religion related to conceptions of immortal-
ity and/or spirit-quieting could fall under the extremely broad and rather
vague conception of Taoism proffered by Fukunaga.

This approach stands in marked contrast to that of a long line of western
scholars such as Anna Seidel, Rolf Stein, Michel Strickmann, Terry Klee-
man, and Nathan Sivin. Each of these scholars has argued that the Taoist tradition, far from being a general Chinese religious orientation, was from at least the second century C.E. an elite, textually based religious movement that defined itself in terms of ritual lineages and that emerged at least in part in opposition to popular cultic practices. I argue that such terminological issues are particularly important for understanding early Japanese religion; while it is highly doubtful, for instance, that Taoist liturgical institutions were transmitted to the Japanese islands, it appears highly likely that immigrant lineages from the Korean peninsula would have been familiar with popular continental cultic forms.

**Adams and Horizons**

More broadly speaking, the work of Fukunaga, Yoshino, and others is marred by a strong reliance upon what Wiebke Denecke has dubbed “Adamistic philology.” This approach, Denecke argues, “traces every lexical unit to a point of origin, as if it had been ‘quoted’ directly from a Chinese source for the first time in the history of Japanese writing.” Rather than simply acknowledging a given text’s or author’s deep engagement with a canonical tradition that had continental roots, these scholars tend to reduce the meaning of any particular term to that which is found in the oldest Chinese source. In so doing, they tend to ignore the cultic horizon of reception in which such terms emerged and were then employed within the Japanese islands. Not surprisingly, this has had the additional effect of once again reinforcing the notion of the “foreignness” of such practices as opposed to the purportedly “native” practices that existed outside of the court.

This emphasis upon textual origins has thus served to reinforce the widely held belief that the appearance of cultic forms with continental roots was the work of intellectuals at court in the service of the royal house. This has in turn perpetuated the belief that continental influences must have come from the elite, textually based traditions of the continent. In this sense, at least, the fundamental premises of a pure, native folk religiosity, coupled with a dynamic royal house, could well be strengthened by the ostensibly iconoclastic approach of Fukunaga and Yoshino.

In contrast to Fukunaga and Yoshino, I take as a point of departure the premise that religious developments at the Yamato court are best understood against the horizon of reception that was constituted by lineages and cultic centers across the Japanese islands. In so doing I have benefited enormously from the work of a number of Japanese scholars, such as Murayama Shūichi, Shinkawa Tokio, and Wada Atsumu. These scholars have been
content for the most part to focus on the role of continental conceptions of *yin* and *yang* (*onmyōdō*) within the intellectual life of the period rather than seeking for their origins within the Taoist canon. I argue, however, that the prevalence of *onmyōdō* conceptions within court-sponsored literature represented not elite appropriations of continental knowledge, but the pervasive influence of commonly held cultic forms that had taken root throughout the Japanese islands. Once we abandon prewar paradigms that configured the royal cult as both the embodiment of native cultic identity and the chief producer of cultic innovation, it becomes possible to offer a new vision of the purportedly “native” popular cults of the Nara and Heian periods that formed within a variety of technological and social frameworks.13

**Fabrics and Borders**

In contrast to the works of the aforementioned authors, my principal concern here is not the meaning for the court of the images woven together within the (often divergent) court-sponsored texts that it sponsored, such as the *Kojiki*, *Nibon sboki*, and *Fudoki*. Although each of these texts can of course be read as representations of the royal or courtier imagination, I mainly focus on the degree to which all of them were permeated by elements associated with immigrant lineages and their assorted technological and cultic practices and interests. Without ignoring the content of the court-centered religious and ideological imaginaries that pervade the Nara and early Heian textual corpus, I am equally concerned with the fabric from which these imaginaries were fashioned. Bluntly put, I argue that to a very large degree immigrant and service lineages closely associated with continental technologies and cults shaped both the fabric and parameters, in terms of which courtiers and rulers conceived and expressed their visions of all under Heaven.

Inherent in this approach are several methodological premises, among the most prominent of which are the following. (1) Although the archeological record continues to improve yearly, we are fundamentally dependent upon textual sources that were products of courtiers and elite/literate elements of society. (2) Although we cannot assume that these texts speak with one voice or reflect a single, coherent ideological stance, reading them together can help elucidate points of commonality in terms of which divergent representations were conceived and expressed.14 (3) Although it is not possible to “get outside” of these texts, it is possible (and essential) to recontextualize them. My readings are premised upon the belief that the court was not a discrete, unified identity, but rather a site of contesta-
tion among several lineages with discrete interests, cultic traditions, and ties to disparate regions, cultic centers, and deities. (4) Among the greatest factors giving impetus to textual production at court was an attempt to reconfigure both collective memories and cultic practices as they related to lineages and cultic centers across the Japanese islands. In describing this process, I therefore assume that the court was as much a consumer as a producer of new ideological and cultic forms. (5) To a large degree, the royal line and the figure of the tennō were constituted out of ideological and cultic materials at hand, not with imports from the continent or cultic practices that were created ex nihilo. Court-sponsored texts such as Nibon sboki and Kojiki were not merely imaginative constructions of a world that never was; they were also, and in large part, attempts to appropriate and transform preexisting narratives of ancestors, gods, and shrines that were drawn from written sources submitted by the most prominent lineages at court. (6) The ancestral cults of these lineages were, in turn, often deeply connected with legends of shrines, tombs, and deities inscribed in specific cultic landscapes. Prominent court lineages both maintained ancestral shrines in distant regions and participated in the process of assembling and editing materials for the court chronicles, and hence they were well positioned to mediate the process by which narratives from distant locales were transmutated into material for the royal imaginaries of Tenmu and his successors. (7) Because, prior to their appropriation, these narratives emerged within a wide variety of geographic and social contexts that were not controlled by the court, not only do we find important differences in orientation between texts such as the Nibon sboki and the Kojiki, but we also find multiple and often competing voices within each text as well. Seen from this perspective, it is therefore possible to view both the court and its ideological/textual production as themselves products of interactions with (and influences from) local concerns and elites.

In light of all this, I argue that the presence of continental literary and cultic tropes within court-sponsored rites and texts often reflects not direct literary quotations from continental texts, but rather the deployment of a cultic vocabulary that, while originally rooted in continental cultic discourses, was widely used at cultic centers across the Japanese islands. In Denecke’s formulation, rather than searching for intertextual relationships between the Chinese classics and court-sponsored texts from Yamato, my concern is with the pervasive “intertopical” cultic relationships that can be shown to have existed between popular religious practices in China, the Korean peninsula, and the Japanese islands. Indeed, in some cases we shall see that cultic vocabulary associated with continental technologies and immortality cults
constituted an essential element in the ancestral cults and local legends that appear throughout the earliest literature of the Japanese islands.

**Put It Down to the Calendar**

My focus, therefore, is not on rulers and their advisers per se, but on local cultic centers and lineages that appear to have been best placed to facilitate and mediate the diffusion of continental cultic traditions across the Japanese islands. I thus do not seek to trace the diffusion of continental technologies and cultic practices emanating out from the court towards the periphery. Rather, I focus on service groups and lineages that traced their descent to the Korean peninsula, were based in coastal regions, and were engaged in continental technological practices such as medicine, weaving, and sericulture. These groups, I argue, were best placed both to import cultic and technological practices from the continent and to transmit these practices at court and in the countryside. Once we examine the cultic geography of such groups and trace the movement of their ancestral legends and tutelary deities from coastal regions in Kyūshū, Tamba, Kii, and elsewhere towards the Yamato plain, it becomes possible to sketch, in at least very broad strokes, possible sources and routes of transmission for the continental cultic and technological forms that did so much to transform the political and religious culture of the Japanese islands.

Chapter 1 begins this process by tracing the role of the Hata, an immigrant kinship group from the Korean kingdom of Silla, in the complex interactions between rulers, *kami*, and buddhas during the Nara and early Heian periods. Because immigrant lineages such as the Hata played a major role both in the formative Buddhist tradition and in a series of local cults that were absorbed by the royal cult, their influence extended across the religious spectrum of the Nara period. As the court increasingly turned to lineages such as the Hata for Buddhist and non-Buddhist sources of protection from the hostile spirits that traveled the roadways of the land, members of the Hata came to pervade not only the upper echelons of the ecclesial hierarchy, but also some of the most powerful lineages at court. As a result, when Kammu *tennō* moved his court to the main Hata stronghold in Yamashiro province at the start of the Heian period, it was Hata monks and courtiers who propitiated the Hata shrines and deities that surrounded the court.

Because the ancestral deities of the Hata and other immigrant lineages were by definition “foreign” deities, or “*karakami,*” Chapter 2 takes up the role of *karakami* and animal sacrifice in the construction of the “native”
cultic paradigms and the formation of the Japanese Buddhist tradition. In contrast to the near-universal assertion that the “Shintō” and the Buddhist traditions of Japan abhor the shedding of blood, this chapter argues that animal sacrifice was a pervasive element in popular cultic practice in the Asuka and Nara periods. Beginning with a series of legends involving sacrifice and cowherd deities, the text explores the role of the cult of the Weaver Maiden and the Cowherd from the Chinese festival calendar in the diffusion of such legends. These cults, I argue, were directly related to rites of spirit pacification at roadsides and involved not only sacrifice but also the use of substitute bodies (bitogata) and ritual amulets. By focusing on legends involving meat offerings and the logic of substitution that pervaded even the Buddhist tale literature from the period, the chapter highlights the degree to which continental conceptions of spirit, sacrifice, and the logic of ritual substitution were important elements of continuity across the religious spectrum of the period.

Chapter 3 explores the influence of Chinese conceptions of medicine and immortality in the development of the ideal religious type, known as “bijiri.” The chapter begins with a discussion of “medicine hunts” undertaken by the court in the Yoshino region of Yamato in accordance with the Chinese medical texts and the Chinese festival calendar. The chapter argues that a series of ancestral legends and cults from the region closely correlate with legends of female shamans from Chinese sources and that the topographical features of the Yoshino mountains were considered especially conducive to the pursuit of superhuman powers. Because female immortals frequently appear as ancestors of lineages closely associated with the transmission of continental medical technologies, the chapter argues that the development of both Buddhist and “native” cults in the region was in fact stimulated by the importation of continental conceptions of medicine and by the belief that a mix of drugs and ascetic practice could lead to the attainment of both immortality and control over the spirits of the dead.

In Chapter 4 I build upon this discussion by examining the role of continental conceptions of spirit pacification in shaping the founding legend of Japanese Buddhism. This chapter argues that because the establishment of the Buddhist tradition was deeply rooted in political violence and the subsequent need to propitiate hostile spirits, the tradition encountered a recurring “Atsumori effect,” in which the gods of the vanquished claim the attention of the victors. Reading the founding legend of Japanese Buddhism in this light, the text examines the role of the vanquished Mononobe kinship group in the construction of the emerging Japanese Buddhist tradition. Focusing on the cultic practices of the Mononobe and their affiliated kinship
groups, the chapter details a pervasive pattern of rites of spirit pacification based upon the Chinese cults of the Queen Mother of the West and the Weaver Maiden and the Cowherd.

Chapter 5 explores the role of sericulture cults from the Chinese festival calendar in the literary and cultic discourse of the period through an examination of a set of poems and legends that feature royal emissaries seeking to “call out” women with whom rulers have become enamored. Because the motif of calling out appears to be related to rites of calling to the spirits of the recently deceased, these legends offer a small glimpse into the ways myths and legends associated with sericulture came to inform purportedly native funerary practices during the period. These legends, I argue, were directly rooted in Chinese rites of the fifteenth day of the first month, during which silkworm goddesses were called out using imagery based upon the silkworm’s ability to “die” as it enters a cocoon only to re-emerge as a transformed being capable of flight.

In Chapter 6 I explore the role of these cults at a cluster of cultic centers at the heart of the royal cult of the Nara and Heian periods. As silks and woven items came to be used as a basic medium of exchange during the period, rites associated with sericulture and weaving assumed a major role in both the cultic and economic life across the Japanese islands. Because weaving and sericulture were heavily gendered activities across East Asia, the transmission of sericulture and weaving cults had a profound effect upon the construction of the cultic identity of female shamans and ancestors across the Japanese islands. Focusing on the sacerdotal lineages at such major cultic centers as the Kamo, Miwa, and Izushi shrines, I conclude with a discussion of the degree to which legends depicting “sacred marriages” between the female ancestors of these lineages and the deities and ancestors of the royal house helped the lineages shape the character and direction of court ritual for centuries to come.

Chapter 7 explores the role played by rites of sericulture and resurrection in the formation of the cult of Amaterasu no Ōmikami, the founding ancestor of the royal lineage. The chapter focuses on one version of the myth of the Heavenly Grotto, in which Amaterasu is called back from the land of the dead after she has impaled herself with a shuttle while weaving in a ritual chamber. Because this legend served as the mythic basis for the Rite of Spirit-quieting (Mitama Shizume Matsuri), one of the main pillars of court ritual, it was of enormous importance for the royal cult. The chapter reads the myth against a series of narratives from the third and fifth months of the Chinese festival calendar that call attention to a broader network of sericulture rites and legends centering upon the violent death of young
maidens and the subsequent propitiation of their spirits. These legends, I suggest, so influenced the construction of Amaterasu as a royal ancestor that she is represented not only as a weaving maiden but also as a silkworm goddess spinning silk from cocoons in her mouth.

As these chapters trace the movements of kami, ancestors, immortals, and demons across the seas and highways of the Japanese islands, they often lead to obscure byways of Japanese religious history. By thus focusing on religious practices from the social and geographic margins as well as those of the courtly center, I have sought to present a fuller, more nuanced picture of the often violent ebb and flow that animated religious practice in this land of 80,000 deities. It is my hope that in charting the course of these developments I have done justice both to the tremendous social and religious ferment that characterized this period of Japanese history and to the profound, if often hidden, continuities that underlay the diverse responses of rulers, monks, courtiers, and provincials to the challenges engendered by the technological, cultural, and political upheavals of this pivotal epoch.