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NEXT VOL. II

Shamanism in Early Japanese Pure Land Buddhism: The Concept of the Pure Land Reconsidered

Early Japanese Pure Land Buddhism[1] can be more accurately engaged within the context of Japanese shamanism. It is a common occurrence in religious discourse as well as academic discourse to use a seemingly homogeneous and simple term, such as "Pure Land Buddhism," to retroactively fit a diverse historical context of practice and belief. Religious ideologies and practices in the Nara and Heian periods commonly referred to as Early Pure Land Buddhism were especially shamanic in character. "During the Nara period, people did not hope that they themselves might be reborn after death in the Pure Land; rather, they performed rites and offered prayers that their deceased parents or spouses might do so."[2] It is my contention that the religious professionals who would mediate such a "transaction" can be considered shamans in the traditional sense because, among other things, they served the typical role of psychopomp. Later, Shingon 真言宗, Tendai 天台宗, and Shugendō 修験道, as well as non-official religious professionals participated in this characteristically shamanic form of religion. In later periods, the sects that came to name Hōnen 法然 and Shinran 親鸞 as their founders established orthodoxies that sought to quell these earlier shamanic trends in practices and interpretation. The tendency to associate Jōdo 浄土宗 and Jōdo Shinshū 浄土真宗 orthodoxies exclusively with the term "Japanese Pure Land Buddhism" will be revealed as problematic by an examination of the early diversity of monastic and extra-monastic shamanic practices and beliefs concerning Pure Lands. I will begin with a general

description of the evolution of Japanese religious traditions before moving on to describe how the Pure Land concept as understood by various ascetics (shamans, *yamabushi* 山伏, and *hijiri* 聖) and ascetic movements *nenbutsuhijiri* 念仏聖, *amidahijiri* 阿弥陀聖, and *shugendō* 修験道.

The term *buddhakşetra* is often translated as "buddha-sphere." According to standard Mahayana cosmology, Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are understood to "purify" their spheres of influence. Therefore, in East Asia the term is often translated as "Pure Land" (Ch: jìngtǔ; Jp: jōdo 浄土). Rebirth in one of these Pure Lands is one of the common goals across the Mahayana spectrum. One of the many methods by which Buddhists have sought to accomplish this goal is through "buddha-contemplation" (Ch: nìanfó; Jp: nenbutsu 念仏). These concepts are most often narrowly associated with the Buddha Amitābha. However, *nenbutsu* and *jōdo* oriented practices may be associated with any Bodhisattva or Buddha, or other deity associated with these entities. Pure Land practices may be understood to be one of the common threads running throughout societies influenced by Buddhism.

Japanese religion contains within it various strategies for mapping and engaging sacred realms or realities such as Pure Lands. At various points in Japanese history, the physical islands of Japan were understood to be divine. As a result, the mapping of Pure Lands onto the spiritually inhabited land comes as no surprise. The Japanese physical landscape was understood to be inhabited by various "extra-human entities." Many of these beings were at one point or another associated with a particular Buddha or Bodhisattva.

Furthermore, the mountains, valleys, or other abodes of these deities came to be understood as Pure Lands or Hells, *jigoku* 地獄, within the Japanese Buddhist context. Both Shingon and Tendai Buddhisms—the early mega-monastic compounds—professed diverse strategies by which to engage, contain, or appropriate the various kinds of entities that were seen to inhabit the Japanese religious landscape. However, Shingon and Tendai orthodoxy did not necessarily have a monopoly on religious professionalism. Certainly, by the time of the emergence of the Japanese historical record, Sino-Buddhist and other Chinese literary and bureaucratic forms dominated Japanese means of national articulation. However, just as in many societies, we can find within Japanese religion a character known as the shaman. These local and often non-affiliated religious professionals engaged the world of spirits, Buddhas, and Bodhisattvas in various ways. *Nenbutsu,* or Buddha name recitations, were among their arsenal of many technologies. Before moving on to engage the various ways in which the *nenbutsu* and *jōdo* concepts were utilized by Japanese shamanic figures, I will seek to define shamanism as a broad category of academic discourse as well its specifically Japanese manifestation.

Implicit within any definition of shamanism is a definition for religion. Blacker defines the shaman as one who has acquired the power to transcend the barrier between the seen and unseen worlds. A dissociated trance is often associated with these religious professionals.[3] It would follow that shamanism is any system by which communication or influence is attempted across this barrier. What then is the dividing line, if any, between what we will here call shamanism, and that which we refer to as religion? Certainly, shamanism and religion as broad umbrella terms share much in common. I would argue

that there are many situations in which one would be hard pressed to tell the difference. Shamanism is certainly religious, but religion is not always shamanic. Shamanism, then, should be defined by the dissociated trance state that the religious professional brings about or encounters along the road to finding mediation or solutions to communal problems. There are various techniques that a shaman might use to induce such a state. Dancing, chanting, self-inflicted pain or fasting, enduring extremes of temperature or physical exertion, or, on some occasions, the trance may simply "happen" to the shaman. The shaman will typically experience a feeling of "otherness." They will either encounter or be inhabited by a "significant other-than-human-person" or entity.[4] In the end, however, both shamanism and religion are constructed terms used by academics to broadly discuss the lives and actions of human beings in specific times and contexts. Therefore, it is imperative that any discussion in which these terms are to be used should be grounded in terms of specific historical or political realities.

Blacker distinguishes between two types of Japanese shaman: the *miko* 巫女and the ascetic. The *miko* is usually a woman who acts as a conduit between the spirit world and the world of common experience. The trance of the *miko* is often violent. This trance is something the shaman must work herself into by means of shaking or chanting, eventually culminating in the replacement of the *miko*'s personality with that of a particular *kami* 神. A *kami* will here after be defined as a "significant other-than-human person" or entity. According to Blacker, the second form of Japanese shaman is the ascetic. The male ascetic is typically the one who brings the *miko* into her state of trance. "He is primarily a healer, one who is capable of banishing the malevolent spirits

responsible for sickness and madness and transforming them into powers for good."[5] The *miko* and the ascetic, therefore, differ in their acquired trance states. The ascetic's trance may be characterized by celestial or cosmological flights between worlds during which the ascetic appears to be in "a deep comatose state of suspended animation."[6] Though there are many differences between these two religious professionals, two characteristics unite them: both engage in trance, and both communicate with or engage extra-human entities. The ascetic will be my primary object of investigation.

Both shamanism and Buddhism are reified "-isms" that are used by scholars to encapsulate disparate practices and beliefs across time and space. As such, a degree of deconstruction, bracketing and front-loading is necessary before engaging the intersection of Buddhism and shamanism in the Japanese context. "Shaman" is often a term used by anthropologists and scholars of religion to refer to those religious professionals that do not easily fit into one of the proper constructed "world religions." As a result, most religious professionals that do not explicitly define themselves and their practices by a particular institutional criterion may be understood as shamanic. Critical investigations into Buddhism and shamanism in Japan undermine any clear definitional understanding of Buddhism in the early stages of the Japanese encounter with Chinese culture.

Japanese "history" begins with the Chinese encounter. As a result, Japanese religion as it may be understood and studied is highly conditioned by Chinese modes of thinking and articulation, Buddhism being chief among these. Buddhism is often discussed as if it were a "thing" that was created in India, and then carried into China and finally Japan.

This essentialist perspective tends toward the reification of Buddhist ideas as if they were unchanged, and not, as in many cases, wholly recreated, by the cultures they inhabited. Critical scholarship on the topic has shown that Chinese Buddhism was produced by Chinese cultural motifs. Likewise, Japanese Buddhism was in many ways produced by Japanese ways of engaging perceived extra-human realities. This should not be seen as a counter-move to reify Japanese or Chinese culture, but rather it is meant to undermine a simple understanding of Buddhism broadly speaking. The study of Japanese religions has further been complicated by a constant attempt by scholars at various times to define or differentiate Buddhism from indigenous pre-Chinese beliefs. Due to the influence of Alan Grapard and Kuroda Toshio, recent scholars have taken to understanding Japanese religion in its context.[7] As a result, Japanese religion, whether it be portrayed as Buddhist, Shintō, or shamanic, "should not be considered the story of the relationship between 'two major faiths,' but rather a tableau, or an ever-shifting kaleidoscopic pattern of forces."[8] It is within this context that these shamanic religious professionals and shamanic movements should be understood.

The ascetic as identified by Blacker will be examined in two categories: the *hijiriI* 聖 and the *yamabushi* 山伏. Though the terms are used interchangeably at times, *hijiri* will be understood as a more generic term for extra-orthodox or extra-institutional itinerant religious professionals. The *yamabushi* on the other hand is more closely related to Shugendō orders which are in turn more closely affiliated with Shingon and Tendai orthodoxies. These religious professionals often emerged from the mountains to perform exorcisms or supplications to the *kami* or Buddhas on behalf of individuals or

communities. These figures were often quite controversial. During the Nara period, En-no-gyō-ja 役の行者(the purported founder of Shugendō) "appeared and spread other forms of Buddhism to the people. Those forms of Buddhism however, were repressed by the state orthodoxy, because as forms of popular Buddhism, they were seen as proponents of views that did not mesh structurally with those advanced by the various houses or by the state."[9] In the early period of the Japanese articulation of Buddhism, many monks defected from the aristocratic ranks and set out to engage in mountain austerities and shamanic practices. During this early period, these figures were seen as a threat to the status quo, and they were persecuted. However, as Buddhist institutions influenced popular shamanic practices, and as shamanic practices influenced Buddhism, the attitudes of the aristocrats began to change, and the popularity of extra-orthodox interpretations began to grow. As a result of this turning tide, many of these wonder-workers were directly or indirectly affiliated with the larger monastic compounds. First, we will consider the shamanic "Pure Land" practices of the more famous *nenbutsu-hiriji* before moving to engage the more systematic practices and beliefs associated with Shugendō professions.

One of the first and most famous *nenbutsu-hijiri* was Kōya (sometimes read Kūya) 空也(903-972) who spread a form of *nenbutsu* practice among both aristocratic and non-elite circles. Kōya became a monk at the age of 20 and set upon a constant recitation of the name of Amitābha. However, it was not simply the efficacy of the *nenbutsu* itself that allowed him to do such things. Kōya was also a mountain ascetic. As part of his practice he would travel through the country side "building bridges, digging wells, repairing

temples and cremating the dead while reciting the *nenbutsu*."[10] He would also "keep a vigil without moving or sleeping while burning incense on his arm. As a result of his self-mortification, Kōya is said to have received a vision of Kannon."[11] Kōya is particularly interesting because he seems to have been using the *nenbutsu* to Amida as a means of quelling evil spirits and propitiating the dead. [12] To this degree we can understand him better as a shamanic figure.

Kōya's carrier is indicative of the earliest Japanese way of using the *nenbutsu*. Early *nenbutsu* and Pure Land devotion in Japan was not geared towards individual salvation, but instead it was deeply embedded in the ancestor worship of the court, and as a means of pacifying evil spirits in the common religion. It was not until much later that this particular religious technology would be used to effect rebirth in a Pure Land as an individualized goal. Because of the prominence of this misunderstanding of early Pure Land piety, it is often assumed that Kōya's practice was merely an extension of Tendai orthodox visualization and meditation exercises. [13] Kōya was quite popular among the nobility because, "Kōya's *nembutsu* represented the essence of the aristocratic Pure Land faith from the late ninth and tenth centuries."[14] The religious landscape engaged in by the elite was one in which a plethora of deities and magical techniques were needed for protection from malevolent spirits and forces of nature. Kōya's popularity is indicative of shamanic *nenbutsu* recitation being an important facet of Japanese Common Religion, meaning that it was practiced by both elite and commoners. Kōya is not unique in his utilization of shamanic Pure Land ritual technologies. If we can understand Kōya as one side of a spectrum, with the monastic establishment on the other side, perhaps it would

behoove our discussion here to examine the "middle ground" between the two. Let us now turn to Shugendō.

After the Meiji Restoration (1868), the newly formed Japanese government set out to systematically separate indigenous and imported religion. The purpose of these actions was to consolidate, and simultaneously create a Japanese identity that was not conditioned or influenced by Buddhism or other "non-Japanese" ideologies. This movement towards segregation, among other things, resulted in the dissolution of Shugendō guilds. The chief reason for this is quite simple: Shugendō explicitly traffics between *kami* tradition and the amalgamated Japanese Buddhist traditions that made up Japanese religion up until that point. It has been said that Shugendō is the "essence" of Japanese religion.[15] Though this statement is problematic for obvious reasons, it certainly touches upon an important point that this paper has tried to emphasize, namely, Japanese religion has been an amalgamation throughout most of its history. Therefore, when we talk about Japanese Buddhist conventions, i.e. Pure Land thought, we are talking about movements that look more like Shugendō than idealized, exclusively sectarian narratives might lead one to believe.

Shugendō concepts of the Pure Land center upon mountain ascetic practices. Some of the first Shugendō practitioners were *amida-hijiri*.[16] These *hijiri* understood the ritually transformed mountain on which they engaged in their ascetic practices to be the Pure Land of a variety of Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, *kami*, or a whole host of other extra-human entities.[17] Mountain Practices, *nyūbu shugyō* 入峰修行 and consecration ceremonies,

shōkanjō 正灌頂 (Skt. *Abhişeka*; Jpn. *Kanjō*) allow the Shugenja to pass through the Ten Realms, *jūkai* 十界, from the hells to the "attainment of buddhahood in this body," *sokushinsokubutsu* 即身即仏.[18] Additionally, commemoration rites, *kuyōhō* 供養法enable a Shugenja to embody a Buddha, Bodhisattva, *kami* 神, etc. (*Fudō Myōō* 不動明王 is perhaps most popular.) It is in this way that Shugenja are employed during village festivals, *matsuri* 祭, to make obeisance to local *kami* and Buddhas. The end result of this transformation is the creation of a Pure Land. The mountain on which these practices are conducted becomes the purified realm of a Buddha.[19]

Shugendō rites contextually understood, "consist of magico-religious activities performed in response to the religious needs or demands of people in local communities."[20] Incantations, *kaji* 加持/ Prayer, *kitō* 祈祷allow the Shugenja to achieve identification with the deity in question. The Shugenja's identity and the deity's identities merge into one. It is understood that the power gained from this transformation can then be used to help people. Other characteristically shamanic practices include exorcism, *tsukimono otoshi* 憑きものおとし/*chōbuku* 調伏, fire ceremonies for averting misfortunes, *sokusai goma* 息災護摩, and prayers for possession, *yori kitō* 憑祈祷. Spells and charms, *fuju* 符呪*, majinai* 呪い, *omamori* お守りinclude those intended for healing, safe childbirth, protection from theft, safe journey, and other assorted amulets are also among the Shugenja's arsenal.

Gorai Shigeru's study of Shugendō reveals that much of our knowledge on the topic is drawn from traditional lore, or *denshō* 伝承. This is an important point that should be emphasized in the discussion of broad themes in Japanese religion. Popular literature is often more telling of religion "on-the-ground" than elite literature. It is unfortunate that popular literature and "lore" has been so neglected by scholars thus far. Recent trends in the field, however, seem to indicate that this is changing.

Gorai identifies several different genres of Shugendō lore: origin lore, *engi denshō* 縁起伝承which often deals with the establishment of sacred; shrine and temple origin stories, *shajiengi* 社寺縁起; stories discussing kami understood as Buddhas, *honjisuijaku* 本地垂迹; Shugendō practice, *Shugendō gyōba* 修験道行場, such as *Hari no mimi*, 針の耳 or "the ear of the needle," practitioner tries to pass through narrow hole, if he is "without sin" he will pass through easily; mountain pilgrimages *nyūbu shugyō* 入峰修行 taken each season; "Lotus Assemblies"(*renge-e* 蓮華会) and "Mountain Nenbutsu" (*yama nenbutsu* 山念仏); physical remains at Shugendō sites, *Shugendō iseki denshō* 修験道遺跡伝承; Lore about sacred mountain entities such as "goblins" *tengu* 天狗, "spirits" *kami* 神; lore about the "other world" of the mountains, *sanchū takai denshō* 山中他界伝承in which mountains are often understood to be hells, *jigoku* 地獄 or Pure Lands *gokuraku* 極楽/*jōdo* 浄土.[21]

Shamans are often described as psychopomps. A psychopomp is a person or being who shepherds spirits to or from the spirit world. Therefore, if Japanese religion is particularly

shamanic in nature, it should come as no surprise that the two most popular deities in the Japanese Buddhist pantheon are Jizō 地蔵 and Amida, two deities whose job is to usher sentient beings to the Pure Land. Later Jōdo and Jōdo Shinshū orthodoxies established Amida name recitation as the only efficacious means of achieving individual salvation. Additionally, these institutions encouraged their adherents to worship Amida to the exclusion of all other *kami* and Buddhas. It has been pointed out by several scholars, however, that the early communities which were to be eventually become Jōdo or Shin Buddhism did not make such a clear distinction.[22] Leading up to the medieval period, a variety of "other powers" were used by the common people. Amida was but one of them.[23] As we can see, the broader shamanic and conglomerate context of early, and to a large extent later, Japanese religion complicates any clear picture of early Pure Land Buddhism.

One of the primary intentions of this paper has been to question the way in which Japanese religious traditions have come to be studied. "Buddhist," "Shintō," and "shamanic" are terms with limited utility. However, by studying specific ritual contexts such as Shugendō, and specific religious professionals in context such as *nenbutsu-hijiri* and others, a more accurate portrait may appear in the study of Japanese religion. Within the broader landscape of Japanese religious history the Pure Land has been engaged and understood in a variety of ways. Studies in popular religion and extra-orthodox interpretation reveal a much more complicated picture than terms like "Pure Land Buddhism" might initially imply.

> [I]t is inaccurate to use the term 'Buddhist' to describe Japanese rituals. Because of the nature of the context in which those rituals are performed, and because they are so pervaded by indigenous notions of protocol, power, and legitimacy, they are something

> other than purely Buddhist. Similarly, it is inaccurate to characterize 'Shinto' rituals in which the role of aesthetics is so profoundly associated with Buddhist doctrine, and the function of the whole ritual so deeply imbued with originally Buddhist rationales. These rituals are something other than purely Shinto in nature. They are combinatory.[24]

Thus it is from a fundamentally "combinatory" point of view that we should view Japanese ritual traditions. In conclusion, I have hoped to suggest that as far as categories go, shamanism as a term may be more helpful than "Shintō" or "Buddhist" when describing Japanese religion.

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[1]The term "Early Pure Land Buddhism" is a term most often used to describe the Pure Land (Amida阿弥陀, Miroku弥勒, Kannon観音, Yakushi薬師, etc.) beliefs and practices that predate Hōnen's "exclusive" Amida nenbutsu recitation. This term is problematic for a number of reasons. To begin, Pure Land schools only existed after Hōnen declared Amida's nenbutsu to be the only efficacious practice during the period of degeneration. Furthermore, this form of practice had been one of the most common and basic forms of practice within monastic establishments in China, Korea, Vietnam, Tibet, Taiwan, and Japan. These practices were, however, usually understood within in a meditative/visualization or otherwise more complicated monastic regimen. Therefore, to speak of "Pure Land Buddhism" before Hōnen is to construct a distinction that did not exist at the time. The reason for the prominence of this term can be attributed to Japanese and English language scholars who are heavily influenced by sectarian scholarship.

[2]Allan Grapard, *The Protocol of the Gods : A Study of the Kasuga Cult in Japanese History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 56.

[3]Carmen Blacker, *The Catalpa Bow, A Study in Shamanistic Practices in Japan* (London: Routledge Curzon, 1975, 1986, 1999), 21.

[4]Graham Harvey, ed., *Shamanism, a Reader*.(London: Routledge Curzon, 2003), 9.

[5]Blacker, 22.

[6]Ibid., 23.

[7]Mark Teeuwen and Fabio Rambelli, ed., "Introduction: Combinatory religion and the *Honji suijaku* Paradigm in Pre- modern Japan," in *Buddhas and Kami in Japan: Honji Suijaku as a Combinatory Paradigm* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2003), 4-5.

[8]Norman Havens, "Shinto," in *Nanzan Guide to Japanese Religions*, ed. Clark Chilson and Paul Swanson (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006), 18.

[9]Grapard, 62.

[10]Hisao Inagaki and Harold Stewart. *The Three Pure Land Sutras*, *Bdk English Tripitaka* (Berkeley: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 1995), 11.

[11]Tasuku Hayami, "On Problems Surrounding Kūya's Appearance." tr. Robert F. Rhodes. *Japanese Religions* 21.1 (January 1996): 11.

[12]Hayami, 24.

[13]Ibid, 11.

[14]Ibid., 26.

[15]Shigeru Gorai, "Shugendo Lore," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 16.2-3 (1989): 120.

[16]Gorai, 126.

[17]Ibid., 126-127.

[18]Technically, *sokushinshokubutsu* 即身即仏means attaining unification with a buddha, the *Amitabha Visualization Sutra* discusses the practitioner's "ego-self" undergoing a transformative merger with that Buddha. *Sokushinjōbutsu*即身成仏, however, means "attaining buddhahood in this body" in a more "transformative sense."

[19]The realm of a Buddha is known as a "Pure Land," *jōdo*浄土、Buddhas are often identified with *kami*, *kami* often live in mountains. So, if a *kami* lives in a mountain, and that *kami* is understood to be a Buddha, then that mountain is a Pure Land. Hitoshi Miyake, "Religious Rituals in Shugendo," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 16.2-3 (1989): 109. See also: Gorai, 130.

[20]Miyake, 101.

[21]Gorai, 120-122.

[22]James L. Ford, "Jōkei and the Rhetoric of 'Other Power' and 'Easy Practice' in Medieval Japanese Buddhism," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 29.1-2 (2002): 99.

[23]Ford, 67.

[24]Grapard, 171.