

Tragic Victims in Japanese Religion, Politics, and the Arts

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The purpose of this article is to draw attention to the presence in Japan of a victimary discourse and a scapegoat mechanism which, beyond religion, helped shape Japanese politics, literature and the arts. This victimary discourse, which yet needs to be defined, has been so influential in pre-modern Japanese culture, that it became a national ideology. A thorough understanding of Japanese culture without realizing the religious, political and cultural importance of this ideology would at best be incomplete and superficial.

Historical evidence of a victimary discourse in Japan is as old as historiography and written literature. Entire portions of histories such as the *Nihongi* and the *Fuso Ryakki*, and the *Gukansho* were based on the scapegoating ideology. An entire genre of Japanese literature – the tales of the failing heroes – including such great classics as the *Heike Monogatari*, and numerous dramatic as well as pictorial works such as the *Kitano Tenjin Engi Emaki*, a national treasure, draw from it. By sponsoring religious institutions and literary as well as artistic works around scapegoats, political leaders have drawn their legitimacy from this ideology.

The fear and worship of political victims occupies an important place in Japanese religion. Like ancestral and nature gods (*kami* in Japanese), political victims were deified and subject to worship from the lowest echelons of society to the very top. Let me discuss some concrete examples and try to define the kind of victim worship, which, in the course of history, has assumed such importance.

Perhaps we should begin with Japan's oldest and most revered anthology of poetry entitled the *Manyoshu*. Containing more than 4500 songs, some of which transmitted orally for generations, the first two books of the *Manyoshu* already existed by the middle of the eighth century. Given the craze for things Chinese at that time, the *Manyoshu* may have been a Japanese version of its great Chinese predecessor, the *Shih Ching*. Whereas the idea to compile such an anthology was certainly Chinese, the nature and content of the songs differs greatly, for *Manyoshu* songs are mainly ritual songs sung at such ritual occasions as

travel, marriage, enthronement, funerals, etc., often it seems by important persons such as emperors, empresses, officials, and, perhaps most importantly, by official ritualistic poets.(1) Umehara Takashi suggested convincingly that the oldest, original books of the *Manyoshu* contain a disproportionate number of songs sung by political victims: Kakinomoto no Hitomaro, Otomo no Yakamochi, Prince Arima, Prince Otsu's sister and possibly more.(2) This was in the 1960's and 70's, when Japanese scholars became acutely aware of the importance of scapegoats in their culture, Hitomaro died in obscure circumstance in exile. His ranks were posthumously restored, an effort to appease his spirit as we can tell from similar facts in later Japanese history. Yakamochi was executed, as a result of having been implicated in the assassination of Fujiwara no Tanetsugu in 785. This was between the Nara period (710-784) and the Heian period (794-1185) when, because of political instability, the emperor Kanmu decided to relocate his capital from Nara to Nagaoka (784-94) and then to what is now known as Kyoto. Princes Arima and Otsu were executed because of their involvement in imperial succession disputes. Was the original *Manyoshu* an attempt to publish the works of political victims to appease their spirits?

Before defining the "theology" of victims, let me briefly present another series of prominent victims, victimized by the political ascendancy of the Fujiwara clan. The Japanese history entitled *Shoku Nihongi*, records under the date of 20/5/863 (all dates henceforth will be in the order of day, lunar month, and year) a cult offered to a number of political victims at the imperial garden called Shinsen-en just south of Kyoto's imperial compound. The worshiped victims were as follows: 1. Prince Sawara (posth. Emperor Sudo, d. 785) who was accused of having plotted against the above Fujiwara no Tanetsugu and against the transfer of the capital from Nara to Nagaoka. Prince Sawara was exiled and died in mysterious circumstances without having ever been pardoned, aged 36. 2. Prince Iyo (executed in 807) and his mother Kisshi both victims of an imperial succession dispute in 807. 3. Fujiwara no Nakanari (executed in 810) responsible for the Kusuko Uprising. 4. Tachibana no Hayanari, involved in the Jowa Uprising and executed in 842. He had been in China with Saicho (posthumously Dengyo Daishi), the founder of the Japanese Tendai school of Buddhism. 5. Bunya no Miyatamaro was put to death the following year as a result of the same uprising. 6. Mononobe no Moriya who, with the rest of the Mononobe clan, was killed by the Soga clan in 587.(3)

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Later, two more prominent victims were added to the list. Kibi no Makibi (693-775), who had spent some years in China and is credited with the transfer to Japan of the Korean deity Gozu Tenno. According to the scroll entitled *Kibi Daijin Nitto Emaki* (Scroll of Minister Kibi's Journey to China now at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts) Kibi studied Chinese poetry, closed in a tower and engaged the Chinese in chess and, aided by the ghost of Abe no Nakamaro, was able to outdo other Chinese scholars in the interpretation of the *Shih Ching*.(4) They also added to the list Sugawara no Michizane (more on him below) to

become the Eight Goryo, the Eight August Spirits, the most worshiped victims.

The 863 cult called *goryo-e* or “meeting with the august spirits” worshiped these victims in ways no different than many Japanese festivals today. They were offered a popular festival including a lecture on the sutras *Konkomyo-gyo* and *Hannayshin-gyo* followed by performances by the artists of the Bureau of Music of Chinese and Korean dances, *sangaku* performances, shooting arrows from horseback, sumo wrestling, and puppet plays. The purpose of the 863 *goryo-e* was to appease these spirits but not, as is the case in other cultures, to banish them from the human world. Rather than to banish them, the community tried to convert these victims into beneficent, tutelary deities. The nature of Japanese deities, whether nature, ancestral or scapegoat ones, has traditionally been ambivalent. Deities can be both good and evil; when ‘good’ the members try periodically to maintain that quality in their deities, because they believe that their agriculture and wellbeing depended on it. When bad for any reason, they try to convert the deity/deities back to good ones by offering them, often on an ad hoc basis, gay and elaborate festivals as tokens of community effort and sacrifice. One of the methods to appease these victims was to restore their ranks or, as in the case of Emperor Sudo, bestow on them even higher ranks, which they then enjoy forever in the heavenly bureaucracy.

The 863 *goryo-e* was not the only rite held to appease these spirits. Such *goryo-e* were also held in the provinces. More was done to appease the spirit of Prince Sawara. After the premature death in 9/intercalary3/785 of his wife as a result of an epidemic, Emperor Kanmu declared a general amnesty and restored Prince Sawara to the rank of Crown Prince and offered the prince a proper burial. In 11/6/785, when the new crown prince fell ill, an oracle revealed that he was possessed by Prince Sawara’s spirit. In 19/7 therefore, the Emperor gave the dead prince the title of Sudo Tenno (Emperor Sudo) and his grave was transferred to the Yamato region, the proper site for imperial burials. This is the only known case in which the title of emperor was given to a dead person. When this proved insufficient, the Emperor decided to relocate the capital and to move to present Kyoto.

Similar efforts had already been made concerning other members of the *goryo*. In 3/850 Emperor Ninmyo died followed two days later by his wife. In the belief that this was the work of Hayanari, in 5/850, the new emperor promoted Hayanari to Fifth Rank and his grave was transferred to his native province, thus ending, posthumously, Hayanari’s demotion and exile. In 5/853, after an epidemic in the Third Month, the court awarded him the even higher Junior Fourth Rank.

From what we have learned so far, we can offer the following definition of Japanese victim/deities. Traditionally, many East Asian (Chinese, Korean and Japanese) religions are based on a parallelism of real and supernatural worlds. The real world is meant to reflect a supernatural one. An exact replica of the Chinese government, with all its offices and officials was believed to exist in the other world as well. Based on this parallelism, the

Japanese believed that a victim will take its office, power, or that to which it felt entitled to, or that which was unjustly taken away from him, into the world of the dead. The power, which they enjoyed or were supposed to enjoy in life, is the same power from which they can exact their revenge and perpetrate evil upon their communities from the other world. Hence the name 'vengeful deities' some scholars have given to them.

By definition, these victims were people who died prematurely, in unnatural circumstances. These include: execution, exile, death during travel (*kykaushi*), suicide, death as a result of grudge, jealousy or any other strong emotion, death on the battlefield, death as a result of natural calamities such as epidemics, floods, earthquakes, fires, and starvation.

It is only logical therefore that the more powerful a victim has been during his or her life, the more it was feared. For if an emperor, an imperial prince or any other high government official is victimized, that spirit can effect a revenge on the living that is commensurate with the power it enjoyed or took as granted, when it were alive. Such victims were for the Japanese the very *raison d'être* of all natural disasters, social and political upheavals, epidemics, unusual natural phenomena (eclipses, snow in summer, etc) and provided them with an explanation of their volatile world and lives.

Once these victimary spirits are appeased by the efforts of those who were not directly involved in their deaths or by later leaders, they turn into good deities willing to protect the community. Many Japanese festivals, which actuate such victims, make them into scapegoats. Not only do they have the potential to cause harm to the community but also, as appeased deities, they become scapegoats who, absorbing the sins of the community, help to prevent the very harms they potentially perpetrate. Such is indeed the ambivalence of practically all Japanese deities.

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That such a religious system could become the mainstay of the political system comes as no surprise. For those who have the political, social and economic power to build shrines for them and offer them elaborate worship, are also those who were believed to control these victims as well as the natural and human disasters they allegedly cause. Hence the fact that, as far back we can trace this religious phenomenon in historiography, the worship of political victims has been the prerogative of powerful people and families. Hence also the fact that the 863 *goryo-e* was sponsored by people who, at the start of the *sessho-kanpaku* system of government, had considerable political ambition. *Sessho* are the regents who served during the reign of infant emperors and *kanpaku* (e.g. prime minister) was the highest position in the imperial government. The combined *sessho-kanpaku* was equal to civil dictator. These titles have been traditionally given to leading members of the Fujiwara clan who controlled the imperial throne by marrying their daughters to the emperors (traditional imperial in-laws) and often by enthroning their infant grandsons. The fact that

the *sessho-kanpaku* system developed at the same time as the first *goryo-e* is no coincidence. It was sponsored by Fujiwara no Mototsune (836-91), *kanpaku* in 887 (related to 3 emperors) and Fujiwara no Tsuneyuki. The *sessho* regent system has already begun under Fujiwara no Yoshifusa (804-72) Mototsune's father, in 866.

Such a cult did not appear suddenly and out-of-nowhere in 863. It had existed already before, sponsored by political outs to embarrass the leaders whenever natural disaster struck. Natural disasters have traditionally been considered portents of heaven's displeasure with the current political leadership. Why was it that Fujiwara no Yoshifusa and his son Mototsune brought such 'out' cult into the political mainstream? Was it that Yoshifusa used this system to compete religiously against rivals within his own clan? Or was it that he needed to legitimize his newly acquired power by sponsoring this cult? We may never know the answer to all these questions without taking later development into account. It is well known, however, that Yoshifusa competed with many brothers (he had four) and competition among siblings was common in the Japanese clan system. This was true especially when, under Yoshifusa, the Fujiwara developed into a family system (Kajuji, Kan'in, Kujo, Nijo, Ichijo, Iwakura, Saionji, etc.) on the basis of hereditary rights to office.

In order to reply to these questions, we need to take into account the later developments of the cult of political victims and to discuss the details of Sugawara no Michizane's career. The above-mentioned Mototsune had four sons and four daughters. Under the Chinese political system the Japanese had adopted by the seventh century, women had no rights to political office, but a matrilineal and matrilineal system was still lingering on before it changed, beginning with the leading Fujiwara in the tenth century, into a patrilineal family system. Under Mototsune, political rivalry among brothers continued unabated. Mototsune's eldest son Tokihira ((871-909) took over the political authority from his father and his career began early when, in 14/2/899, Emperor Uda (r. 887-97), appointed him Sadaijin (Minister of the Left), the most powerful office under the Kanpaku. Uda whose mother was not a Fujiwara, however, was a strong-willed emperor intent on balancing Fujiwara power with other clans. He therefore appointed Sugawara no Michizane (845-903) Udaijin (Minister of the Right). Under the hereditary system developing at that time, the Sugawara had no rights to such high office and the Fujiwara under Tokihira profited from every chance to intrigue against Michizane. Michizane however was the descendent of a scholarly family. His father was an expert in Chinese studies and his expertise was particularly important when the imperial government needed information about Chinese precedent and a scholar-diplomat in its foreign relations. His grandfather had opened a school of Chinese learning and the precocious Michizane, able to compose Chinese poems at age 10, eventually became an expert in his own rights. In 874, he was promoted to Fifth Rank, which gave him access to the court and opened the door to high government positions. In 880, at the death of his father, he took over his grandfather's college. As an expert in Chinese studies, he was charged in 883 and 7/5/895 with receiving the ambassadors of the kingdom of Parhae. After the death of Fujiwara no Mototsune, his first son Tokihira succeeded him. Emperor Uda

appointed Michizane to head his private office. In 893, he became adjunct to the crown prince's (later Emperor Daigo) office headed by Tokihira. In 894, Michizane was appointed ambassador to China but, concerned about the decline of the T'ang dynasty and perhaps about his own political future, he advised the emperor to discontinue sending embassies to China for the time being. In 897, Emperor Uda abdicated in favor of Emperor Daigo. After the enthronement ceremonies, both Tokihira and Michizane were promoted to Third Rank and to the positions of Minister of the Left and Minister of the Right respectively. This promotion gave Michizane access to all correspondence. Three daughters of Michizane entered the court, one married Emperor Uda's second son. In 900, Miyoshi no Kiyoyuki, whom Michizane had once refused the doctorate, warns Michizane that a plot is being prepared against him at court.

Uda was able to keep the political rivalry between his two ministers under check but, as was customary by the time, he abdicated in favor of the younger Emperor Daigo (885-930). Soon after the Daigo's enthronement, Tokihira assembled such disgruntled politicians as Fujiwara no Kiyotsura (34), Minamoto no Hikaru (56), the son of Emperor Ninmyo (810-50), Fujiwara no Sadakuni (34) and Fujiwara no Sugane (45). Tokihira promised Hikaru the position of Uchuben (Secretary of the Right) if successful Sugane who served as Uchuben aspired to the position of Udaisho (General of the Right Guard). At first, Michizane promoted Sugane but, during a banquet, slapped him on grounds of insubordination. The marriage of Michizane's daughter to Prince Tokiyo, the maternal brother of Emperor Daigo, served as food for the plotters. They accused Michizane of promoting Tokiyo at the expense of Daigo, who at age seventeen was already too old for the emperorship. In 3/1/901, the credulous Daigo immediately decreed that Michizane should be stripped from his court rank and sent to the Dazaifu (Military Headquarters of the West) as a low-ranking official.⁽⁵⁾ This amounted to nothing else but exile. His entire family was sent away from Kyoto under the harshest conditions. In 25/1/901, Michizane left Kyoto. Before leaving, he sent his Chinese poems to his friend Ki no Haseo. Intent on preventing Michizane's exile, Ex-emperor Toba tried to force his way into the palace but Minamoto no Sugane prevented him.⁽⁶⁾ The Ex-emperor sat in the grass and waited until the end of the day without avail. That day, Minamoto no Hikaru was appointed Minister of the Right and took over Michizane's post. On 25/2/903, after having proclaimed his innocence, Michizane died unpardoned at the Dazaifu. He was sixty years old.

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It is worth our while to consult the two major histories which cover that time, not only to know what happened in the years immediately after Michizane's untimely death, but also to realize how the victimary ideology shaped contemporary historiography. Let me begin with the more detailed *Nihongiryaku* (a history compiled by an unknown person, covering from the age of the gods to Emperor Goichijo (reigned 1016-36) assuming the format of a diary from the reign of Emperor Uda). Then I will proceed to the *Fuso Ryakki* (Compiled by monk

Koen (1119-69?), covering from Emperor Jinmu (first official emperor, dates unknown) till Emperor Horikawa (reigned 1079-1107)

25/12/902 the death of Michizane reported

7/7/903 Drought

8/7/903 Prayers for rain

7/intercalary3/904 Epidemic

1/4/904 Solar eclipse

7/4/904 Thunderstorm

23/6/904 Floods

1/10/904 Solar eclipse

1/4/905 Solar eclipse

15/4/905 Lunar eclipse

1/4/906 Solar eclipse

2/4/906 violent thunderstorm. Hail as big as eggs

3/7/906 Death of Fujiwara no Sadakuni

7/6/907 Death of Fujiwara no Atsuko, Emperor Daigo's wetnurse

1/9/907 Solar eclipse

7/11/907 Death of Fujiwara no Sugane, age 54

1/2/908 Solar eclipse

4/4/908 Death of Fujiwara no Tokihira, age 39

1/5/908 Epidemic

19/5/908 Floods

9/6/908 Thunderstorm

12/6/908 Prayer for the cessation of rain

1/7/908 Insurrection in Shimofusa Province

7/908 Epidemic

1/1/909 Abundant rain

22/4/909 Violent storms

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23/4/909 Violent storms

14/5/909 Thunderstorm

1/7/909 Solar eclipse

1/1/910 Solar eclipse

1/6/910 Solar eclipse

6/910 Flood in the capital

1/12/910 Solar eclipse

8/4/911 Solar eclipse

10/4/911 Prayers for rain

5/5/911 Epidemic

1/interc.5/911 Solar eclipse

2/6/911 Prayers for rain

1/11/911 Solar eclipse

21/3/912 Minamoto no Hikaru dies age 68 during a hunt. His horse dragged him and his body disappeared in the mud

1/5/912 Solar eclipse

14/8/912 A kite dropped a mouse it had caught onto Fujiwara no Kiyotsura

1/11/912 Solar eclipse

7/11/912 Violent storms

1/4/913 Solar eclipse

2/5/913 Fire in the capital destroys 617 houses

1/10/913 Solar eclipse

1/3/914 Solar eclipse

1/9/914 Solar eclipse

10/15/914 Epidemic. Continues into the following year

1/3/916 Solar eclipse

3/5/916 Hail

7/5/916 Hail with violent winds

29/6/916 Earthquake

1/9/916 Solar eclipse

Disturbances in eastern Japan

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1/3/917 Solar eclipse

7/917 Beginning of a famine

1/1/918 Solar eclipse

1/8/918 Solar eclipse

15/8/918 Violent storms

Such reports continue until 923. Below I select only the events related to the people who played a role in Michizane's exile and supported Fujiwara no Tokihira.

21/3/923 Death of Crown Prince Yasuakira. People cried as loud as thunder. He was possessed by Kan's (Michizane's) spirit.

20/4/923 Michizane restored to Minister of the Right, Second Rank

11/interc.4/923 Epidemic

26/6/930 The weather was clear. A black cloud moved in from Mt. Atago and quickly covered the sky. It thundered loudly and lightning struck the Seiryoden. The wall caught fire. Dainagon Fujiwara no Kiyotsura's dress caught fire, his breast split and he died instantly, age 64. Uchuben Taira no Mareyo suffered burns in his face. At the Shishinden: Hyoe-no-Suke Mibu Tadakane's hair caught fire and he died. Ki no Kagetsura's stomach split open and he lost consciousness. Azumi Munehito's knees sustained burns and he could no longer get up. The Emperor fell ill. An epidemic reigned.

15/9/930 The Emperor began to cough

29/9/930 The Emperor passed away.[\(7\)](#)

Fuso Ryakki.

20/4/903 Report of an oracle in which Michizane revealed that he turned into a god of thunder

10/2/904 Yasuakira (two years old) appointed crown prince

7/8/908 Minamoto no Sugane dies at age 54

14/1/909 Lunar eclipse.

909/ Spring and Summer Epidemic

4/4/909 Tokihira dies at age 39. During his illness, ten monks came to offer prayers but they were afraid of the evil spirit that was haunting Tokihira. In broad daylight, Michizane's spirit came out of Tokihira's ears as a blue dragon.

1/1/911 Solar eclipse

7/6/911 Floods

12/3/913 Minamoto no Hikaru dies at age 68. He dreamed of Michizane the year before

2/5/915 Fire destroys 617 houses in the capital

7

5/6/915 Floods

916 Autumn Epidemic

8/918 Floods

20/4/923 Michizane's rank restored after an oracle

11/intercalary 4/923 Epidemic

18/6/925 Crown Prince Yasuyori dies at age 5. His mother was Tokihira's daughter

925 Summer Drought

4-5/927 severe epidemic

1/6/927 Earthquake

11/7/927 Thunder storm. Lightning strikes pagoda of Saidai-ji Temple

3/929 Epidemic in Home Provinces. The deads fill the streets

16/6/929 Lunar eclipse

26/7/929 Typhoon and floods

8/929 Typhoon

930 Spring and Summer Epidemic

26/6/930 Lightning strikes Imperial Palace twice. Michizane caused the lightning.

Emperor Daigo dies at age 36.

The *Fuso Ryakki* includes an entire supplement on the lightning.

No only in the enumeration of natural calamities and the death of Michizane's rivals, in some cases, the histories specifically mention Michizane's spirit as the perpetrator. In its report of Minamoto no Hikaru's cruel death, the *Nihongiryaku* strongly suggests that it was Michizane who was behind it. The same can be said about the kite dropping a dead mouse onto Fujiwara no Kiyotsura's head. Furthermore, in its report of Crown Prince Yasuakira's

death, it refers to Michizane as the cause. In the case of the lightning striking the private quarters of Emperor Daigo, and his consequent death, both histories make it unequivocally clear that the cause of the lightning was no other than the god of thunder, Michizane. The thirteenth-century scroll entitled *Kitano Tenjin Engi Emaki*, now a national treasure clearly represents the lightning as engendered by Sugawara no Michizane's vengeful spirit. Both histories were compiled at least partly according to a victimary discourse.

According to the *Okagami* (Great Mirror), a collection of stories about Fujiwara no Michinaga (966-1027) and his times claims that "People say Tokihira's descendents died out because of the terrible sin he committed. No doubt they are right..." Tokihira's eldest son Yasutada died in 936, at age 47, a ghost haunting his deathbed. Tokihira's third son Atsusada died in 943 at the age of thirty-eight. Both daughters died prematurely. Only his second son Akitada was able to live over sixty and rose to the position of Minister of the Right, but as the *Okagami* points out, only because he lived simply and frugally. Yet his line died out too in the end allegedly because of Michizane's grudge.[\(8\)](#)

Under the year 941, the *Fuso Ryakki* reports that Priest Nichizo (905?-985?) had met Michizane in hell as the god of lightning (Karai Tenjin). Nichizo was undergoing austerities in Yoshino and went to hell and back.[\(9\)](#) Already in 905, Umasake Yasuyuki, an official who followed Michizane into exile, received an oracle instructing him to erect a shrine and to worship Michizane as the deity Tenman Daijissai Tenjin. This deity whose Sanskrit name is Mahesvara, was originally a Brahman deity ruling over the Great One Thousand Worlds and who is surrounded sixty protective deities and one hundred thousand heavenly goddesses.[\(10\)](#) Upon receiving this oracle, he built the Anraku-ji (lit. Peace and Comfort Temple) at the Dazaifu.

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These histories make it absolutely clear that, in the context of Japanese religion at that time, Michizane's spirit needs to be placated and converted into a benevolent deity. Ironically perhaps, the person who started this task was no other than Tokihira's younger brother and political rival Fujiwara no Tadahira (880-949) and his descendants. Upon Minamoto no Hikaru's death, Tadahira managed to promote himself Minister of the Right and, when Michizane was posthumously reappointed Minister of the Right, Tadahira was given the position of Minister of the Left. He also profited from Tokihira's premature death to revive the regency and served as *sessho* under Emperor Suzaku (r. 930-46) and *kanpaku* (941-48) under Suzaku and Emperor Murakami.

In 919, Tadahira rebuilt the Anraku-ji at the Dazaifu and in 959, Tadahira's son Morosuke (908-60) sponsored a building in what was later to become the celebrated Kitano Shrine in Kyoto. The shrine goes back to a *miko*[\(11\)](#) called Ayako who received an oracle from Michizane instructing her to worship him at Ukon no Baba; a site in an area of Kyoto

generally referred to as Kitano. Ukon no Baba had been a place of agricultural worship dedicated to the thunder and water gods and numerous prayers for rain or a good harvest were held there, some offered by Emperor Daigo and prominent politicians like Tokihira. Morosuke also offered treasures to the Kitano Shrine, which helped it, become a permanent institution with branches all over Japan.

The year 959 is significant. Morosuke rivaled Sugane's son Motokata (888-953). Motokata married his daughter to Emperor Murakami (r. 946-67) who bore him his first son. But Morosuke also managed to marry his daughters to the emperor and gave birth to two sons who became future emperors (Reizei r. 967-69 and Enyu r. 969-84) and succeeded in making his son crown prince. The building of the Kitano Shrine also coincided with Morosuke's efforts to establish his branch of the Fujiwara as a separate family called the Kujo. After his death in 960, the Tadahira-Morosuke's line became the most powerful faction at court. His elder brother revived the regency system under Emperor Reizei whereupon it became hereditary within the Kujo line. All subsequent Kujo leaders sponsored the Kitano Shrine: Kaneie (929-90) and Michinaga (966-1027). In 8/5/987, Kaneie had the Kitano shrine included among the Nineteen Great Shrines of the imperial family.[\(12\)](#) In 22/5/993, Michinaga, Kaneie's fifth son, *sessho* in 1015 and *kanpaku* in 1018, sent an emissary to the Dazaifu in Kyushu to promote Michizane to Minister of the Left, Senior First Rank. On the 22/interc.10/993, Michizane was promoted to Dajo Daijin (Chief Minister). In 21/10/1004 he arranged for the first imperial visit to the shrine. The imperial visit coincided with Michinaga's rise to supreme power.[\(13\)](#)

By now, the Kitano Shrine dedicated to the spirit of Sugawara no Michizane had become the tutelary shrine of the Kujo Family. The Kujo also made an effort to restore the Sugawara family and eventually both the Anraku-ji and the Kitano shrine were placed under Michizane's descendants. The leading Fujiwara also sponsored the Sugawara to write Michizane's in-life and after-life biographies. The *Kitano Tenjin Goden*, written during the years 931 and 947 was written by a Sugawara and destined for a new history of Japan entitled *Shinkokushi*. [\(14\)](#) In 1106, a Sugawara Nobutsune compiled his *Kanke Godenki* (Biography of the Sugawara Family) about the Michizane's life and deification.[\(15\)](#) Sugawara Tamenaga (1158-1246) may have been the author of *Tenjin Ki* in which we learn for the first time that Michizane may have been an incarnation of the bodhisattva Kannon.[\(16\)](#)

In 12/994, Michizane revealed in an oracle that that he no longer holds any grudge and that he will henceforth protect the state.[\(17\)](#) This set the stage for Michizane's worship as a god of literature. Literature became an important part of the Kitano cult. It began with the readings of Michizane's poems from his private collection entitled *Kanke Koshu* within a Shinto/Buddhist ritual called *Tenjin Koshiki* offered to the Kitano shrine.[\(18\)](#) Beginning perhaps with Yoshishige no Yasutane (934?-97), poets with literary ambitions offered prayers at the shrine. When, in the year 986, Yasutane offered a series of Chinese poems to

the shrine, he called Michizane “the father of literature.”⁽¹⁹⁾ The *Gonara Tenno Shinki* also considers Michizane as a god of poetry.⁽²⁰⁾ In 25/6/1012, Oe no Masahira called Michizane “a true master of poetry” when he visited the Kitano shrine.⁽²¹⁾ Some compare Michizane with Confucius and the Buddha. These statements contributed to Michizane’s deification as a god of literature and promoted the visits to the Kitano shrine of numerous poets throughout subsequent history.

Kujo Kanezane (1149-1207), sixth descendent of Michinaga, was behind the compilation of the *Kitano Tenjin Engi*, the history of the Kitano Shrine. Kanezane became regent at age 38 and in 1189, strongly supported by the first shogun Minamoto no Yoritomo, was appointed Chief Minister. The 1219 copy of the manuscript reveals that Priest Jien (1155-1225), Kanezane’s younger brother was one of its authors. It also reveals that the history was probably written in the years 1190-99. This was a time of deep political and social changes in Japan when the old imperial government lost power to a military, shogunal government. It is therefore conceivable that the Kujo intended the work to sustain their new position as liaison between the imperial and shogunal governments.

The *Kitano Tenjin Engi* begins with Michizane’s brilliant career. Then it gives an account of Tokihira’s intrigue, Michizane’s exile and tragic death. His soul turned into an evil deity who caused misfortunes at the court and upon his rivals. Then it tells the story of the Kitano shrine and extols the virtues of the Kujo. The history ends with an explanation of the virtues of the Kitano shrine and those of the deity Tenjin (Michizane) as a beneficent deity.⁽²²⁾

9

In 1219, Kujo Michiie (1191-1252), Kanezane’s grandson offered an illustrated version of the history entitled *Kitano Tenjin Engi Emaki* (Illustrated Scroll of the History of the Kitano Shrine) and an enlarged version of the history to the Kitano shrine in 1223.⁽²³⁾ This was after the assassination in 1219 of third shogun Sanetomo and after Ex-emperor Gotoba’s abortive attempt to topple the shogunate of 1121. He perhaps intended this new version to placate the spirit of Michizane so that peace may prevail in the nation (of course under Kujo leadership). In 1226, Michiie managed to have his son Yoritsune appointed fourth shogun. Like before, Kujo sponsorship of building projects and literary and artistic works coincided with important political developments and cannot be said to be entirely selfless sacrifice.

Priest Jien contributed considerably to the cult of victims. Understandably so because he lived in a time of deep turmoil. In mid-twelfth century much of the political power of the imperial government shifted to the warriors (samurai). This was not because the warriors usurped imperial power by force, but rather because political factions in the imperial government increasingly used military force to press their demands. By the middle of the twelfth century, two prominent military clans, both originally from the Kanto area of present-day Tokyo emerged: the Taira (also Heike) and the Minamoto (also Genji). At first

the Taira dominated but between 1180 and 1185, the Minamoto eliminated the Taira. During the last battle between the rivaling clans at Dannoura on the Western edge of Japan's main island Honshu, the child emperor Antoku (1178-85) whom the Taira had taken along with his mother and many court nobles perished. After the news of the battle reached the capital Kyoto, the earth shook violently. This was bad news for anyone believing in the power of dead victims.

Concerned about a victimized emperor and nobles, Jien wrote a private moral history entitled the *Gukansho*, petitioned the ex-emperor to build the temple Daisenpoin in Kyoto to appease the spirits and organized the *Heike Monogatari* (Tales of the Heike), one of Japan's great literary classic. As a member of the Kujo, Jien has a stake in promoting the cult of political victims and his activities were in tune with Kujo religious tradition. The *Gukansho* dates to the year 1219; the year Shogun Minamoto no Sanetomo was assassinated and two years before Ex-emperor Gotoba marched against the military government in Kamakura and coincides with the compilation of the *Kitano Tenjin Engi Emaki*. This was also a highly unstable time when the Kujo needed to consolidate their political future and sponsor the religious activities needed for that end. The *Gukansho* is a history in which the vengeful spirits are the main historical driving force. Here is what Jien had to say about vengeful spirits in his *Gukansho*:

Vengeful spirits are those which, when they were alive, felt an implacable hatred toward those who caused it. From the tiniest hermit huts to the end of the empire, they slog at their rivals in the traps they tend and seek to destroy them by slander and false accusations; this is how they cause disorder in the world and harm the people. When they cannot exact their revenge from the visible world, they do so from the world of the dead.[\(24\)](#)

Furthermore, Jien claims that it was the cult his ancestors offered that placated Michizane's spirit and allowed the Kujo to prosper. He claims that Michizane was an incarnation of the bodhisattva Kannon who sacrificed himself for the good politics of the Kujo.

In 12/1204, Jien presented to the emperor the following petition for the construction of the temple Daisenpoin:

Since the disturbances started in the Hogen [1154-59] and Genryaku [1184-85] eras, the warriors have made the people uneasy with their constant movements... Maleficent ministers and rebellious warriors have disturbed the nation and have caused wars and many have died far away from their families and have turned into demons. They are like the southern barbarians aspiring to high position, and eastern barbarians who have deviated from the way seeking prosperity. We must

safeguard the nation by overcoming the ills of our times and convert them into good.(25)

Jien wrote further that a person of virtue who has undergone Buddhist discipline must placate these spirits by the Buddhist means of *eko* (Skt. parinamama) and guide them to salvation. He also emphasizes the use of *raku* (sukah) to restore the spirits to normal condition.(26)

In this petition, Jien points out the dangers the victimary spirits present to the nation and urges the emperor to fund the building. Jien suggests that the temple be organized according to four categories of priests, the fourth of which are monks specializing in the recitation of the sutras (sekkyo-shi). Furthermore, he proposes that a group of blind monks with a good voice should be placed under the Sekkyo-shi.(27) One of the professions open to the blind in ancient Japan was to eulogize the dead in a lyrical recitation at the rhythm of a musical instrument called the Biwa. According to the *Moso Yurai* (Origin of the Blind Priests), Empress Genmei (661-712) ordered that blind monks placate the spirits who cause havoc.(28) The blind monks did so by reciting the sutra *Chijin-kyo* (Sutra of the God of the Earth) with their biwa.(29) It was believed that lyrical eulogy and the sympathy it engenders among the living will placate the dead and prevent them from causing calamities. Jien saw in the most talented among these blinds, potent instruments for the placation of the evil spirits. In presenting this proposal, Jien set the foundation for a recitative art called the *Heike-gatari* (Recitation of the Tales of the Heike) which survived until the present.(30) The Daisenpoin was built according to Jien's specifications, but it has not survived.

10

It is not until the *Tsurezuregusa* (Essays in Idleness) written between 1310 and 1331 that we learn more about how Jien organized the *Tales*.

During the reign of ex-Emperor Gotoba, Yukinaga, the Former Governor of Shinano [Province] was known for his learning but, summoned to discuss the poetry of Po Chu-I, but having forgotten two of Po Chu-I's poems about the Dance of the Seven Virtues, was given the nickname "Wearing the hat of the Five Virtues", which depressed him so much that he abandoned his studies and retired from the mundane world. When Priest Jichin [Jien] had difficulties in organizing monk-specialists of an art into a sub-category, he relied on this Lay-priest of Shinano.

This lay-priest created the *Heike Monogatari* and taught the blind monk Jobutsu how to recite it... Because he was from the East, Jobutsu wrote what the warriors told him about the battles. The Biwa priests of today continue to imitate the

natural voice of Jobutsu.(31)

We do not know anything about the activities of these monks during the time the Daisenpoin stood, but, by the thirteenth century, these Biwa monks (Biwa Hoshi) as they were called were placed under the supervision of a family called the Todoza. To place a group of artists under the umbrella of an authoritative family was the norm in the Middle Ages. It was a means for the political sponsors to control the art and to prevent free-for-all creativity. Since these arts were so closely linked to politics, politicians had a major stake in 'correct' performance because any deviation from the sponsored norm could potentially undermine political authority. It was also under the Todoza that an authoritative written text was established precisely to standardize the recitation.(32)

Some of these recitations were subject to a ritual protocol and calendar. On 16/2 every year, the blind monks gathered at a place to the northeast of Kyoto called Shinomiya Kawara to perform a ritual called *shakuto-e*.(33) They did this in honor of their tutelary deity, the fourth prince (Shinomiya) of the emperor Ninmyo (810-50) who was blind and a skilled Biwa performer. Shinomiya Kawara was a liminal area associated with the ten deities called *shiku* which were believed to control the so-called Kimon, the Gate of the Devils in the northeast, through which all evil was believed to pass into the city. According to ancient Japanese belief, Shinomiya Kawara was located in a particularly dangerous direction. On a rock called Biwa-ishi (Biwa Rock), the monks built a stone stupa and recited ten thousand times the sutra *Hannya Shingyo* also called the *Heart Sutra*. Whether they also recited parts of the *Tales* is unknown but likely.

The blind reciters also gathered on the 24/4 every year at the dry riverbed of the Kamo River at the height of Shijo street to worship Emperor Antoku (1178-85) at the anniversary of his tragic death. They did this in an area controlled by the deity of epidemics Gozu Tenno whose shrine, the Gion Shrine, was nearby. The highlight of the ritual was floating a sutra downriver (kyo-nagashi). Floating downriver effigies or other representative objects, was a widely used means to rid oneself of the evil spirits.

The Ashikaga shoguns sponsored public recitation of the *Heike Monogatari*. Called Kanjin Heike, they were also fund-raising events to benefit the building or rebuilding of temples. The 16/4/1466 Kanjin Heike attracted thousands of spectators.

Perhaps most importantly, it was the shoguns of the Kamakura (1185-1333) and Ashikaga (1336-1568) and the Tokugawa (1603-1868) Periods, who came to sponsor the victimary spirits the most. The Kamakura leaders sponsored Dengaku performances as means to appease the noxious spirits. The Ashikaga are on record for having sponsored Dengaku and Sarugaku (both precursors of the modern Noh) events in the dry Kamo riverbed. Under the names Dengaku or Sarugaku, Noh actors performed the evil spirits on a stage constructed in the dry riverbed or other liminal areas around Kyoto. There were numerous Sarugaku

events the Ashikaga sponsored in liminal areas of the capital Kyoto: 11-13/7/1412 such an event took place for three days at the Imamiya shrine, on 12/5/1412 one took place in the Kamo dry riverbed at Shijo. The one of 10/7/1413 occurred not far from the shogunal headquarters. Thousands of Kyoto citizens came to see the lavish performances of the Sarugaku actor On'ami (?-1467). Zeami (1363-1443), a Sarugaku Noh actor of the subdued *yugen* style performed during seven days at Kitano shrine. By 1433, Zeami lost out to the ostentatious style of On'ami. Some of these events ended in fights and quarrels to the extent that the shogunal officials had to shortcut, even prohibit the performances. They had become popular events allowing people to vent their frustrations. But, such prohibitions were only temporary.

Among the many Noh plays staging evil spirits there is a particularly exemplary play. It is *Sanemori* written by the playwright and shogun-sponsored actor Zeami. Saito Sanemori (?-1183) was a warrior fighting on the side of the Taira. He proceeded to Shinohara (Kaga Province) in an effort to halt the advancing Minamoto troops. He was close to sixty, an age far too advanced to go into battle at that time and he was killed. His horse dragged him into the ricefields. Since that time, whenever the villagers faced a bad harvest, they attributed it to the vengeful spirit of Saito Sanemori and offered him a cult called Sanemori-okuri (Sending Off Sanemori) or Mushi-okuri (Sending Off [Noxious] Insects). On the 11/5/1414, according to the *Manzai Jugo Nikki*, a diary kept by the monk Manzai during the years 1411-35, an itinerant priest called Yugyo Shonin, happened to pass through the area, when the spirit of Sanemori appeared to him.⁽³⁴⁾ The villagers told him that the vision predicted a bad harvest. Yugyo Shonin therefore proceeded immediately to exorcise the spirit. Zeami wrote his *Sanemori* on the basis of this story. Evil spirits are usually exorcised on stage which is why the Noh theater became a kind of exorcist theater, the performance of which would safeguard the nation from the havoc these spirits can cause. Sanemore, however, also became a kind of scapegoat deity. In the Mushi-okuri festival which takes place each year, the people touch the puppet representing Sanemori as if to hand their impurities over to him and begin a new cycle free of sin. The floats in the Gion Festival of Kyoto (highlight, July 17 and 18), the modern version of the 836 *goryo-e*, a boy called *chigo* rides on the first Naginata float. The sword (naginata) on top of the float seems threatens the evil spirits into submission. The *chigo* is supposed to absorb all impurities that had accumulated over the years in the community. This is why he has to undergo extensive purification at the end of the festival in order to be readmitted into society.

Conclusion

One plausible reason why political leaders such as the Kujo and later the shoguns sacrificed so much to appease political victims is that this system could be used to explain the world and to maintain the political status quo at the same time. The way this worked should be

clear from the above examples. Natural calamities do occur, but they always subside eventually. To attribute them to political victims, that is, giving them a human cause, ultimately places these calamities under human, political control. Practically all natural calamities in pre-modern Japan were believed to have had a human cause. Before modern science, this allowed the political and religious leaders to identify the cause of natural calamities and to direct their placatory efforts to an identifiable human entity. Natural disaster does strike from time to time but rather than to leave them unexplained and incomprehensible in the minds of the people, the political leaders used them to legitimize their authority. By offering elaborate cult to the political victims, the leaders claimed that evil spirits caused by their predecessors, but they made it clear that it was thanks to their efforts to pacify these spirits that brought about a return of normal conditions. It allows political leaders to claim that, when the calamities subside, it was thanks to their good offices and benevolent, pious government. These deified victims became the mainstay of society and the center of religion. Victimary deities were believed to maintain their presence and to have a strong stake in the state. This is why state affairs could not be conducted without offering them cult. Because of this 'presence', these victimary deities were also revered as oracle-delivering deities, and used to predict the future. Like in Delphi, Japanese political leaders manipulated such oracles to benefit the state.

These deified victims also functioned as scapegoats. They were highly ambivalent. They are both devils and deities, able to cause, but also to abate and prevent calamities. These were the deities on whom the community would hand their sins and on whom they would rely to overcome their calamities. This system balances the forces of good and evil and creates structure and anti-structure. Sympathy with failing heroes, making heroes out of political rivals, villains and rebels, became a cult in which ironically even the victors had to participate.

Perhaps because of the dominant Confucian philosophy, the Chinese have not made heroes out of the defeated, at least not at the national level. Defeat was a divine judgment rather than a human feat. Confucianists tended to make it the "victim's fault." Also, the Chinese did not need to explain natural calamities in terms of the *goryo*. Natural calamities were caused by a "heaven" dissatisfied with official conduct "under heaven" and not by victims seeking justice or revenge. In Japan, however, the *goryo*, like other deities, were placed beyond the morality of good and evil. They were heroes despite the dominant socio-political ideology and regardless of whether or not they were wrong or unjust. In China, a Sugawara no Michizane would probably never have been deified as he was in Japan, on a national level, even though, according to popular opinion, he was wronged.

In Japan, political victims are the anti-heroes religion and the arts engendered. Seeing a play or hearing a story or reading about these victims was believed not only to prevent calamities and perpetuate the order but, psychologically, to defer resentment, revenge and violence. Literary and theatrical heroes are also proxies. They stand for any victim that may

threaten the stability of the state. Rather than sacrificing some living human or animal for the good of the rest, as was practiced in many other cultures, this is a system whereby already dead victims are called to play the role of scapegoats. The tragic heroes in literature and the theater are not living but substitute scapegoats.

Thus the Japanese have used their victims to explain uncontrollable natural forces and human fate. The fear of evil spirits tended to curb unlimited violence. One can kill an enemy, but then one has to worship him. It is conceivable that, emphasizing the power of political victims, Jien intended just that, namely, to curb violence in an age dominated by the warriors. But, at the same time, he wanted to contribute to the political fate of his family. Such dual purpose is a common feature in pre-modern Japanese religion. It is an attempt to divert violence into the metaphysical realm and convert it into an instrument of peace and stability.

12

Notes

1. See on this Herbert Plutschow, *Chaos and Cosmos - Ritual in early and medieval Japanese literature* (Leiden, 1990).[\(back\)](#)
2. "Suitei no uta," *Subaru*, vol 12 (1973) pp. 270-324. See also Masuda Katsumi, "Nagasarebito Hitomaro," *Kokubungaku* (Kaishaku to Kyozaï no Kenkyu) vol. 21, no. 5, pp. 82-84 and Ohama Itsuhiko, "Chinkon no shi," *Bungaku*, vol. 39, no. 9, pp. 1005-15.[\(back\)](#)
3. *Kokushi Taikēi*, vol. 4 (Tokyo, 1934) pp. 112-13.[\(back\)](#)
4. Abe no Nakamaro (701-70) went to China with Kibi but failed to return and died in China. The scroll was probably painted to appease Kibi's spirit. [\(back\)](#)
5. The Dazaifu was established as an office of the *ritsuryō* government in mid-seventh century to guard the northern coast of Kyushu, the nearest point between Japan and the Asiatic continent.[\(back\)](#)
6. The Minamoto surname was given to imperial princes not eligible to become crown princes.[\(back\)](#)
7. *Nihongiryaku* (Shintei Zoho-) *Kokushi Taikēi*, vol. 11 (Tokyo, 1929) pp. 8-42.[\(back\)](#)
8. *Nihon Koten Bungaku Taikēi*, vol. 21 (Tokyo, 1970) p. 79.[\(back\)](#)
9. *Kokushi Taikēi*, vol. 6 (Tokyo, 1907) pp. 708-12.[\(back\)](#)
10. On Umasake Yasuyuki's shrine, see *Tenmangu Anrakuji Soso Nikki*, *Shinto Taikēi*, Jinja-

hen, vol. 48 "Dazaifu" (Tokyo, 1991) p. 4. On the oracle, see *Tenmangu Takusen Ki*, Gunsho Ruiju, vol. 2 Jingi-bu (Tokyo, 1932) p. 130 and *Tenjin Koshiki*, Zoku Gunsho Ruiju, vol. 3, part 1, Jingi-bu, p. 34.[\(back\)](#)

11. *Miko* are shaman-type virgins serving the deities at their shrines. They were believed to become possessed by the deities they represent and deliver oracles.[\(back\)](#)

12. According to the *Dainihon Shiryō* under 24/6/Shōryaku 2. Later, in 3/1039, more shrines were added to the Nineteen. On this, see *Nijunisha Chushiki*, Gunsho Ruiju, vol. 2, Jingi-bu (Tokyo, 1932) p. 209ff.[\(back\)](#)

13. See on this Francine Herail, *Notes Journalières de Fujiwara no Michinaga – Ministre à la Cour de Heian 993-1018 – Traduction du Midokanpakuki*, vol. 3 (Geneve, 1991) pp. 444-45.[\(back\)](#)

14. Compiled during the years 936 and 969.[\(back\)](#)

15. This is included in the Shinto Taikēi, vol. 11, Jinja-hen, pp. 83-90. [\(back\)](#)

16. This is included in Shinto Taikēi, vol. 11, Jinja-hen, pp. 103-29. The original *Tenjin Ki* is lost. The earliest copy dates to the year 1194.[\(back\)](#)

17. This is recorded in the *Kitano Tenjin Goden*, Shinto Taikēi, vol. 11, Jinja-hen, "Kitano", pp. 14-15. [\(back\)](#)

18. For an example, see Zoku Gunsho Ruiju, vol. 3, part 1, Jingi-bu, pp. 42-43. The *Kanke Koshū* poems are the ones Michizane sent to his friend Ki no Haseo before going into exile. They are included in the Nihon Kōten Bungaku Taikēi, vol. 72 (Tokyo, 1966). See also note about poem no. 514 (p. 524).[\(back\)](#)

19. See on this Josef Kyburz, pp. 349-50 and Sakamoto Taro, *Sugawara Michizane*, Jinbutsu Soshō, vol. 100 (Tokyo, 1966) pp. 161-62.[\(back\)](#)

20. See on this Sakamoto Taro, *op. Cit.*, pp. 163-64.[\(back\)](#)

21. Shin Nihon Kōten Bungaku Taikēi, vol. 27 (Tokyo, 1992) p. 347.[\(back\)](#)

22. Gunsho Ruiju, vol 2, Jingi-bu, p. 147.[\(back\)](#)

23. *Shinshui-Nihon Emakimono Zenshu*.[\(back\)](#)

24. Nihon Kōten Bungaku Taikēi, vol. 86 (Tokyo, 1965) p. 339.[\(back\)](#)

25. Reprinted in Fukuda Akira, "Kataribon no seiritsu," *Nihon Bungaku* (June, 1990) p. 58. For a discussion of this document, see Akamatsu Toshihide, *Kamakura Bukkyo no Kenkyu* (Tokyo, 1959) pp. 276-79 and *Zoku Kamakura Bukkyo no Kenkyu* (Tokyo, 1966) pp. 384-87.[\(back\)](#)
26. Dainihon Shiryo, vol. 4, 10, pp. 279-80 "Daisenpoin no koto."[\(back\)](#)
27. Dainihon Shiryo, vol. 4, 10, p. 266.[\(back\)](#)
28. Nihon Shomin Seikatsu Shiryo Shusei, vol. 17, p. 247. [\(back\)](#)
29. The text entitled *Chijin Moso Engi* explains the history of this practice. See Nihon Shomin Seikatsu Shiryo Shusei, vol. 17, pp. 225-27. Yanagita Kunio reports that blind monks were summoned to pray against floods and droughts because they were supposed to control the dragon. See on this (*Teihon-*)*Yanagita Kunio Shu*, vol. 8 (Tokyo, 1962) pp. 309-11.[\(back\)](#)
30. *The Tales of the Heike* (Heike Monogatari) the story of the downfall of the Heike (Taira) clan between 1156 and 1185 told according to the Buddhist law of cause and effect. The oldest manuscript dates to the years between 1219-1243. There are various versions. [\(back\)](#)
31. Nihon Koten Bungaku Taikei, vol. 30 (Tokyo, 1957) pp. 271-72.[\(back\)](#)
32. See *Todayoshu*, Nihon Shomin Seikatsu Shiryo Shusei, vol. 17 (Tokyo, 1972) p. 230.[\(back\)](#)
33. On this ritual, see *Honcho Seiki*, (Shintei Zoho-)Kokushi Taikei, vol. 9 (Tokyo, 1933) p. 12.[\(back\)](#)
34. *Zoku Gunsho Ruiju*, suppl. Vol. 1 (Tokyo, 1924) p. 46.[\(back\)](#)