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Virtual *Kamikakushi*

An Element of Folk Belief in Changing Times and Media

This paper looks at the way in which *kamikakushi*, a term from Japanese folk belief, is presented in different media, particularly the World Wide Web. The core definition of *kamikakushi* is the sudden and mysterious disappearance of individuals attributed to their abduction by some supernatural being. It becomes evident that not only more peripheral aspects vary, such as the identity of abductee and abducting being, but that presentations of *kamikakushi* also increasingly deviate from the core definition. Depending strongly on genre and context *kamikakushi* is explained as caused by supernatural beings, human villains, or people simply losing their way.

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K*amikakushi* 神隠し is a term from the wide area of Japanese folk belief explaining the sudden and mysterious disappearance of individuals as their abduction by supernatural beings. *Kamikakushi* means literally “being hidden by a deity,” and “spirited away” is a reasonably good English translation of the term. Yanagita Kunio collected quite a few reports on *kamikakushi* from various areas of Japan dating from around the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century. After that time *kamikakushi* seems to have drifted somewhat into oblivion, possibly because the increasing urbanization as well as the turmoils of the Pacific War offered more plausible explanations for people gone missing, and the prevalence of natural sciences after the war rendered *kamikakushi* an unconvincing alternative to more secular abduction stories. *Kamikakushi* regained popularity in the last decade or so, particularly after MIYAZAKI Hayao’s successful anime movie *Sen to Chihiro no kamikakushi* 千と千尋の神隠し of 2001.

In this paper I want to look at various references to *kamikakushi* across the media and across the ages. My central question is in how far the images and contexts surrounding *kamikakushi* differ between new media as opposed to more traditional forms of media. The methodology employed is hermeneutic, placing the sources—texts, film, and websites about *kamikakushi*—at the center of attention. As a hermeneutic approach requires a most detailed examination of the sources in question, my main tool is a set of encoding forms originally designed for the analysis of religious organizations’ websites by the members of the research project on Japanese religions and the Internet run at the Japanese Department of Tübingen University in Germany. This encoding form allows for a minute description of the websites under examination taking all aspects of websites—texts, layout, interactivity, and so on—into account (compare KIENLE and STAEMMLER 2003, p. 223). The original encoding form was modified to meet the requirements of my current research.¹ It now consists of a set of complementary forms catering to the different types of media as well as to *kamikakushi* itself.

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A general outline of kamikakushi

To begin with I give a general outline of *kamikakushi*, based on a standard dictionary of Shinto and on a collection of reports about *kamikakushi* from late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries collected and commented upon by Yanagita Kunio (1875–1962), the founding father of Japanese Folklore Studies (SD I, p. 354a; YANAGITA 1975, pp. 51–57). Taken together these two sources provide a solid foundation and starting point for later comparisons.²

The core definition of *kamikakushi*, here as in other sources, is the sudden and mysterious disappearance of individuals due to their abduction by some supernatural being. Yanagita adds the following details: (1) Those abducted were often boys or young men; (2) Only if the missing person was not found during an extensive search by neighbors and relatives and did not reappear after a few days, people spoke of *kamikakushi*; (3) The abducting supernatural being was usually explained as some mountain dweller, deity or *tengu* 天狗—a large human-like creature with a beaked nose and wings and often associated with mountain ascetics;³ (4) The danger of *kamikakushi* was particularly high in winter and during the harvest season; (5) Typical locations for *kamikakushi* were areas where human civilization bordered on uninhabited forests, mountainous regions or streams; (6) Some of those abducted returned, either as half-wits or to tell stories about wondrous journeys to strange countries.

Thus, *kamikakushi* was often the somewhat consoling belief that a missing family member had not met with a dreadful accident, but been taken on a long and interesting journey and might even return some day. Defining a missing person as having met with *kamikakushi* had the additional significant psychological effect of ending the period of anxious searching, allowing relatives to deal with their loss and to name and blame a culprit.

Kamikakushi in conventional media

Japanese media have recounted instances of *kamikakushi* for many centuries. Although manga 漫画, Japanese comic strips, and anime アニメ, Japanese animated cartoons, are created using up-to-date technologies, I want to group them together with print media as “conventional media” as opposed to the new digital, computer-mediated media collectively referred to as the Internet.

Text-based print media: The most famous report about *kamikakushi* was compiled by Hirata Atsutane 平田篤胤 (1776–1843), a renowned scholar of Shinto, who in 1820 met a teenage boy claiming to have encountered *kamikakushi*. Over the next few years this Torakichi 寅吉 told Hirata all about his journeys

2. For an English introduction to *kamikakushi* which includes detailed reference to Yanagita see BLACKER 1967.

3. On *tengu* see M. W. de VISSER 1908, whose article includes several examples of *kamikakushi* attributed to *tengu*.

to miraculous countries and answered Hirata's many questions about his guide and teacher who, he said, was a high-ranking *tengu* (HIRATA 1976). A yet earlier reference may be found in a thirteenth-century Buddhist text that used *kamikakushi* as an example to teach its audience that mountain ascetics—rivals to orthodox Buddhist schools—were unreliable and fraudulent as they were often disguised *tengu* who abducted honest people (in Mujū's 無住 *Shasekishū* 沙石集 [1283], quoted in BLACKER 1967, pp. 116–17).⁴ In one of a series of contemporary mystery short stories set in the mid-nineteenth century the protagonists identify four cases of apparent *kamikakushi* as attempts to cover up one case of insanity, two elopements and one instance of murder (HIRAIWA 1993). A fantasy novel written in 1991 turns an instance of *kamikakushi* virtually inside out by concluding that the boy who had met with *kamikakushi* was not human to begin with, and during his *kamikakushi* had gone to his original world only to return to the human world by mistake and with fatal results (ONO 1991).

These are only some examples from many presentations of *kamikakushi* in print media.⁵ They show that, apart from the core concept of someone disappearing mysteriously and for supernatural reasons, *kamikakushi* has not been contextualized uniformly, but that every author emphasized what he or she—or his or her period of time—regarded as important: Hirata's emphasis is on the nature of *tengu* and the world beyond. The Buddhist text, intended at instructing lay people, stressed that mountain ascetics were unreliable. The mystery novel used *kamikakushi*'s potential for criminal purposes, thereby refuting any truly supernatural causes and hinting at the same time that the term *kamikakushi* was well-known some one hundred and fifty years ago, although well-known did not necessarily coincide with being widely believed. In the modern fantasy novel on the other hand, *kamikakushi* is attributed to supernatural reasons, albeit not to a single abducting being. In this case the term *kamikakushi* needed to be explained to most characters and by extension to the readers as well.

Manga: In *Tantei Gakuen Q* (探偵学園 Q), a series of comic strips aimed at teenagers, the five heroes are given the task to investigate into several connected cases of alleged *kamikakushi* which occurred in an isolated mountain village over the past ten years. They are finally discovered to have been murders committed and covered up by perfectly human agents (AMAGI and SATŌ, 2001 and 2002).

4. Further premodern sources on *kamikakushi* are listed in the *Nihon Kokugo Daijiten* (NKD vol. V, p. 123a). These are two pieces of fiction, in which people suddenly vanished, a seventeenth-century handbook on the composition of poems, likening the scattering of autumn leaves to *kamikakushi* caused by the wind, and a late eighteenth-century dictionary of idioms defining *kamikakushi* as living beings suddenly disappearing from view.

5. For practical reasons I have so far limited my research to print media published as books, ignoring the wide area of newspapers and magazines. I would expect that newspaper references to *kamikakushi* resemble Yanagita's examples both being short reports by the bereaved, their relatives or neighbors recounting how some person had mysteriously disappeared and all search had so far proven unsuccessful.

Although the story never pretends to be anything but a mystery manga, a whodunnit aiming at finding non-supernatural culprit, motive and methods of the crimes, several motifs present in older versions and Yanagita's reports of *kamikakushi* reappear. The most recent victim before the heroes' arrival was a male university student, that is, a young man. He and a yet later victim appear to have been carried away through the air as would be the case had they been abducted by *tengu* (AMAGI and SATŌ 2001, pp. 35–53 and 174–76). *Kamikakushi* occurs on the fringes of civilization as the setting of the crimes is a tiny village somewhere in the Japanese mountains which is isolated not only geographically, but also purposefully cutting itself off from the rest of Japan as it hides a terrible secret going back to the semi-uncivilized conditions of the Pacific War. Additionally, one instance of *kamikakushi* takes place in the immediate vicinity of a small shrine (AMAGI and SATŌ 2001, p. 173), that is, the very site where the human and the divine worlds meet for humans to venerate the deities.

Audiovisual media: MIYAZAKI Hayao's anime *Sen to Chihiro no kamikakushi* (English translation: "Spirited Away") released in July 2001 set a new box office record by attracting twenty-five million visitors to Japanese cinemas within a year and a half (see Kin'yō Tokubetsu Rōdoshō in ONLINE SOURCES). It is therefore probably the main reason why the term *kamikakushi* is so well-known in Japan today. Again, knowing the term neither necessarily implies knowing exactly what it means, nor does it automatically entail believing in its contents. In *Sen to Chihiro no kamikakushi*, the ten-year-old Chihiro 千尋 and her parents take a wrong road and walk through a tunnel which unbeknown to them marks the boundary to another world. The parents eat food prepared for deities and are turned into pigs. Chihiro has to undergo various dangers and adventures to rescue her parents and return to the real world.

In Yanagita's reports of *kamikakushi* those left behind are at the center of attention and the abducted person—male and often past puberty—often returns mentally deranged. Here, however, Chihiro is the central character and a female, pre-puberty heroine who matures through the adventure, while her parents do not even realize that anything extraordinary happened. Although the landscape outside of the tunnel changed slightly in the meantime indicating that some time may have passed in the real world, too, it remains unknown to the audience whether the family was missed and searched for, which Yanagita would have considered essential. The perspective is, thus, turned inside out focusing entirely on the travellers rather than the world they left behind. In the film, despite of its title, no abduction takes place. Chihiro and her parents simply get lost—a motif which reappears in online discussions of *kamikakushi*. It is debatable, whether getting lost qualifies for being referred to as *kamikakushi*, but as we usually only have the villagers' perspective in most reports of *kamikakushi* getting lost may have been quite a frequent reason for *kamikakushi* in non-fictitious instances as

well—and Yanagita indicates that that may indeed have been the case (YANAGITA 1975, p. 53).

Kamikakushi on the Internet

Miscellaneous sites mentioning kamikakushi: There are more than one hundred thousand websites on the Japanese Internet mentioning *kamikakushi*.⁶ Ninety percent of them, however, refer to Miyazaki's film and rather evenly divide into commercial sites, fan sites and sites providing information about the film.⁷ The first sites about *kamikakushi* I encountered which were unconnected to the film were the following sites:

- Three commercial sites advertising books entitled “Somethingorother *kamikakushi*,” for example bestselling mystery author Akagawa Jirō's *Kamikakushi sannin musume* 神隠し三人娘, a collection of five episodes about a bus company travelling to spooky places. Incidentally, here, too, the instances of *kamikakushi* finally turn out to have been crimes committed by human perpetrators (Rakuten Books in ONLINE SOURCES and AKAGAWA 2002).
- Two sites presented short stories written by the webmasters themselves. In one of them the entire Japanese population gradually disappeared through *kamikakushi* leaving only the narrator behind. The story focuses on his gradual realization that despite his earlier discomfort with crowds and competition he is now feeling acutely lonely. As in reports about individual *kamikakushi* the reason for the disappearances remains unknown (Sagara in ONLINE SOURCES).
- One site was run by an organization interested in ghosts and unearthly creatures which contained in its section about *tengu* a brief, matter-of-fact explanation of *kamikakushi* in accordance with Yanagita's description (Yōkai Aigo Kyōkai in ONLINE SOURCES).⁸
- One site contained a virtual table game conducted via drawings and paintings. Participants joined teams and were asked to illustrate various short

6. I conducted an online search for *kamikakushi* (神隠し) with the Japanese Google search engine (google.co.jp) in May 2003 and again in September 2004 which resulted in 143,000 and 116,000 hits respectively. I took the first 100 hits of the second search as the basis for the analysis. Search engines do not yield results suitable for accurate statistical analyses as they find only about 16% of the available results (DÖRING 2003, p. 20), present them in the order of popularity and often have multiple entries of identical links. However, for a general overview over the sources preceding a deeper qualitative analysis, these approximate data are fully sufficient. In addition, using search engines is nearly the only way to get hold of the relevant websites at all, as there is virtually no interlinking between sites referring to *kamikakushi*.

7. This ratio was supported by a new search conducted on 5 July 2005, which yielded 291,000 hits, of which I analysed numbers 201–300.

8. This site was still online as of 2 August 2005, but renewals were discontinued in January 2005.

fantasy scenes. One scene was entitled “*Erudona no kamikakushi*” エルドナの神隠し and recounted that a young child had mysteriously gone missing and the town Erudona’s citizens searched for it desparately. No solution to the mystery is given, but it is interesting to note that this scene was set, as fantasy stories often are, in medieval Europe rather than Japan (Elemental World in ONLINE SOURCES).

- One site was privately run by a fan of mystery stories and manga whose many summaries of various mysteries included the *Tantei Gakuen Q* episode about alleged *kamikakushi* described above (Funifuni Mijinko in ONLINE SOURCES).
- One private site presented German news about Japan and, on occasion of Miyazaki winning the Golden Bear in Berlin in Febuary 2002 for his *Sen to Chihiro no kamikakushi*, discussed difficulties in translating the Japanese term *kamikakushi* into German (Ōzono in ONLINE SOURCES).

Online presentations of *kamikakushi* unconnected to Miyazaki’s film, thus, share the following characteristics: They are individual webpages rather than entire websites, and *kamikakushi* is most often just one topic out of many. Online presentations of *kamikakushi* may refer to presentations of *kamikakushi* in other media but rarely interlink with other webpages about *kamikakushi* itself. Most webpages about *kamikakushi* are text and image centered offering little virtual interactivity apart from online shopping.⁹

The Kamikakushi Dōmei: One example for a site about *kamikakushi* that is quite different from those discussed above is that of the Kamikakushi Dōmei 神隠し同盟, the Kamikakushi League, a virtual association of people interested in *kamikakushi* (Kirishima in ONLINE SOURCES). The Kamikakushi Dōmei’s organizer Kirishima Seichi 霧島誠¹⁰ describes the activities of the Kamikakushi Dōmei as shouting “*kamikakushi da!*” (“This is *kamikakushi!*”) whenever someone gets lost, informing other members of the League if ever anyone witnessed or encountered *kamikakushi* and promoting the idea of *kamikakushi* in everyday life. Kirishima invites anyone who happens to have encountered *kamikakushi*, who is fascinated by *kamikakushi* or prone to getting lost to become a member by the simple virtual interaction of sending an e-mail with one’s name or pseudonym and a short statement about one’s interest in *kamikakushi*. In the three years since its foundation and opening of the website on 7 August 2002 one hundred and fifty-one people have joined the League. Their short statements all appear in the list of members and together with Kirishima’s brief announcements of acceptance constitute about two thirds of the contributions to the site’s BBS (Bulletin Board System). Besides lists of members and the BBS the site con-

9. These conclusions were also true for hits 201–300 of my July 2005 search. Compare note 7.

10. The Japanese characters would support Seichi as a transcription of Kirishima’s personal name, but Kirishima himself writes Seichi (Kirishima in ONLINE SOURCES).

sists only of its opening page listing the above conditions for membership and the League's activities. The entire site has black writing on white background and contains, apart from a small banner with which to promote it, no graphic, acoustic or other elements. Incidentally, the webmaster concludes his introduction of the Kamikakushi Dōmei by stating that if ever this site disappeared, this, too, should be regarded as a case of *kamikakushi*.

Reading through the site three reasons for becoming a member become prominent: Having encountered *kamikakushi* through media was the most frequent explanation. Interestingly, not Miyazaki's anime, but Kōda Gakuto's 甲田学人 *Missing: Kamikakushi no monogatari* 神隠しの物語 was the most common trigger. *Missing* is a series of modern fantasy novels and is set in a high school. The handsome hero deliberately enters another world through *kamikakushi* personified as a very pretty and highly mysterious girl. Four other students search for him, trying to achieve his return (KŌDA 2001). Having fallen for either hero or heroine of *Missing* is the single most important reason why people wrote they joined the League. The second most reason was proclaimed interest in occult and supernatural things. While some members simply wrote that *kamikakushi* sounded fascinating, others expressed a desire to experience it for themselves to see what another world would be like. Some of these wanted to go only if they could return, whereas others sought *kamikakushi* as a means to escape from this world. A third reason was the frequent experience of losing one's way. One member stated that he or she even started referring to a lost eraser as *kamikakushi*, which in a way routinizes the traditionally exceptional concept of *kamikakushi* and turns it into an everyday event.

The site's BBS contains about three hundred entries between March 2003 and July 2005, about a third of which are contributions to discussions. Here, as in most online discussions, only a handful of people contributed, while most members remained silent (DÖRING 2003, p. 67). As in the prevalence of *Missing* and members' interest in occult things, these discussions, too, focus on experiences of supernatural phenomena—or the desire for such encounters and curiosity for other people's experiences. The anonymity provided by the Internet enables contributors to narrate quite private encounters and to admit fears or longings connected to supernatural phenomena which they probably would not have voiced in face-to-face situations with people they only just met (compare DÖRING 2003, p. 155). Thus, the site's BBS enabled members to meet others with similar interests and exchange experiences and opinions.

Finally, members of the Kamikakushi Dōmei are invited to add a link to their private websites in the list of members. These, however, are of little immediate significance for *kamikakushi* as many of them have been moved or shut down in the meantime and most are on topics entirely unrelated to *kamikakushi* and often even unrelated to anything even vaguely religious. Thus, here again, *kamikakushi* as an individual element of Japanese folk belief is not imbedded in any

recurrent religious context, but discussed varyingly in contexts such as popular culture, Japanese folklore and various occult phenomena.

Analysis and Conclusion

Although I have not yet fully completed research on presentations of *kamikakushi*, there are five points I want to make:

1. As I excluded newspaper reports from my research, all examples presented here are fictitious as opposed to the general outline of *kamikakushi* given in the second section of this paper. Thus, differences between the outline and the examples are to be expected. Of the additional aspects Yanagita added to the core definition of *kamikakushi*, the identity of the abductee and abducting being underwent the most significant modifications as one caters to the presentation's target group and the other is limited only by the author's imagination. One frequent motif in fictitious presentations of *kamikakushi*, albeit only hinted at in Yanagita's essay, is that of criminal offenses committed by human perpetrators and disguised as *kamikakushi* by the perpetrators themselves. The fact that the missing persons were searched for and questioned if discovered usually remains unchanged. The nature of a world beyond seems to have been of as much interest to people today as to scholars like Hirata nearly two hundred years ago. Similarly, twilight hours and the fringes of civilization as time and location for *kamikakushi* remain common motifs since the travellers' unusual experiences as well as uncanny locations are fruitful sources for fiction writing. Changes extend to the core definition of *kamikakushi* as non-living objects, such as erasers and websites (compare Kirishima in ONLINE SOURCES) are regarded as possible victims of *kamikakushi* and getting lost becomes a frequent motif (MIYAZAKI 2001; Kirishima in ONLINE SOURCES).

2. Whereas short reports about *kamikakushi* usually take on the perspective of those left behind, the more elaborate fictitious presentations tend to focus on the missing person and his or her adventures. Two prominent examples of the latter are Miyazaki's anime of 2001 and Hirata's *Senkyō ibun* completed as early as 1822. This change of perspective is thus unrelated to the time of composition or medium employed, but depends largely on the information available to the author. Whereas Yanagita often only had the bereaved people's reports, authors of fiction—including Hirata's source Torakichi—are at leisure to focus on the more intriguing adventures of those gone away.

3. Yanagita described *kamikakushi* as mostly occurring on the fringes of civilization, where the cultivated land bordered on the uncultivated land and getting lost in the woods was a very real danger. People in the Kamikakushi Dōmei expressing a desire to escape their normal everyday life, too, seem to regard themselves as differing from society's mainstream, as belonging to the fringes of civilization in a figurative or psychological sense. The desire to escape this world

with its everyday routine of examinations and work is also prominently present in other current presentations of *kamikakushi* regardless of the medium. Ono's modern fantasy novel and Sagara's online short story are two cases in point (ONO 1991; Sagara in ONLINE SOURCES). Although not a new thing entirely, its intensity and its directedness towards a different, more understanding world have increased in the past twenty years or so.

4. A difference between presentations of *kamikakushi* on the Internet as opposed to audio-visual and print media is the spontaneous, lay character of the former. Works published in the traditional ways tend to be more elaborate and their *kamikakushi*-stories more complicated, whereas the short stories published online as well as the contributions to the BBS are quite straight forward and appear to be reasonably direct expressions of their authors' feelings. Helland noted an increasing proportion of unofficial religious websites (HELLAND 2004, p. 27) due to cheaper, easy to use software. And indeed, despite several commercial sites promoting books or DVDs about *kamikakushi*, many *kamikakushi*-related sites are private sites designed and run by individual people.

5. With over sixty percent of Japan's population using the Internet in March 2004 (WIECZOREK 2004, p. 316), the Internet has become part of every day life and not surprisingly strongly interconnects with other elements of popular culture. In the course of my research about virtual *kamikakushi* I have come to realize ever more sharply that it is essential to regard things within their historical and cross-medial context. Virtual *kamikakushi* did not develop in a vacuum, but is highly influenced by—and is in turn influencing—concepts of *kamikakushi* in other media. Current concepts of *kamikakushi*, similarly, as often reiterate as alter concepts—or certain aspects of concepts—presented during earlier periods in history. Similarly it is my contention that elements of folk belief which are currently undergoing rapid changes and appear imbedded in most varying contexts ought to be included more prominently in the study of religion in the (new) media.

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