

**Salvation of the Snake,
The Snake of Salvation :
Buddhist-Shinto Conflict and Resolution**

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INTRODUCTION

Buddhism and Shinto have had a remarkably harmonious coexistence over the past fourteen centuries. This is most probably due to two factors: on the one hand, Shinto lacked a formal structure from which to organize resistance, and on the other, Buddhism had always assimilated the traditions native to the countries it entered. Even so, it is not realistic to maintain that the first period of contact between these two religions was completely free of strife. Indeed, one senses a sometimes violent conflict lurking beneath the surface of certain Japanese Buddhist stories.

This conflict which accompanied Buddhism's entry to the gates of the Japanese spirit also provided the basis for the Buddhist-Shinto syncretization that was to prove so remarkable in later years; what was first a minus was later to become a plus. This essay will examine Buddhist-Shinto relationships as seen in a single cluster of stories, namely, those having to do with snakes. In brief, my thesis is that we can find in these stories first conflict between Buddhism and Shinto, and then, as the relationships between the two settle down, a creative Buddhist use of those ancient Shinto deities that appeared as reptiles.

The malevolent reptilian deity existed in Japan before the introduction of Buddhism, and it is initially regarded by the Buddhists, as well as by other Japanese, as being an evil creature. As Buddhism took a deeper hold on the Japanese consciousness, however, the image of the violent snake—which never completely died out—came to be supplemented by that of a snake of salvation. The movement is from the image of a snake that terrorizes the

populace at the one extreme to the image of a snake that is none other than a manifestation of Buddha at the other.

These two extremes are linked by a road which is far from straight. There are five images of the snake found in mythological (that is, pre-Buddhist) and early sources. These are:

1. The mythical snake.
2. The mythical snake as saved (defeated) by Buddhism.
3. The Buddhist snake.
4. The mytho-Buddhist hybrid.
5. The snake of salvation.

I will discuss each of these in turn, but first a word about my sources.

The mythological material has been drawn primarily from the various *fudoki*, or local histories compiled by Imperial order in the early eighth century, and from *Kojiki* (Record of ancient matters), compiled in 712. The Buddhist material is drawn from the short tale collections known as *setsuwa shū*, which flourished in the Heian and Kamakura periods and which reveal much about how Buddhism was understood and dissiminated in its early stages in Japan. There is a large number of such collections extant and nearly all of them contain tales of snakes, but I have limited my references here to two. These are *Nihon ryōiki*, compiled in the early ninth century by the monk Kyōkai (also read Keikai), and *Konjaku monogatari-shū*, compiled about 1100 by an unknown Buddhist monk. *Ryōiki*, being the oldest extant *setsuwa* collection, is especially valuable for stories from the second of my five categories; in the pages of *Konjaku* one can find examples of tales from all of the categories.¹

1. For a complete translation of *Nihon ryōiki*, see Nakamura 1973. All translations from Japanese sources in this essay are my own work. I would like to gratefully acknowledge the assistance of Professor Mori Masato 森正人 of Aichi Kenritsu Daigaku, who went to the trouble of reading the entire manuscript and offering several helpful comments on both its contents and the translations. All errors, of course, are my own responsibilities.

THE MYTHICAL SNAKE

Hostility to mortals. The mythical snake is characterized by its general hostility to mortals. It should not be considered an "evil" deity, however, since the reptilian form is only one of the manifestations of the water or thunder deity, a complex creature with both desirable and undesirable personality traits. The reptilian manifestation is generally associated with the undesirable personality traits, and rather than to speak of a "snake deity," it is more accurate to speak of deities who sometimes take the form of snakes. It must be remembered, though, that they do so in order to cause mischief, and the snake itself therefore has negative associations. The reptile is an outward manifestation of the violent spirit (*aramitama*) of the deity, a sort of public warning that the deity is in no mood to be bothered. A consideration of two related tales should clarify this aspect of the reptile.

The first story concerns the founding of the Kamo Shrine, and is located in *Yamashiro fudoki* (*Fudoki*, pp. 414-415). A young maiden playing alongside a river notices a red painted arrow float by, which she takes home and puts in her bedroom. Soon thereafter she becomes pregnant and gives birth to a son. Her father then gathers all of the deities for a feast and asks the boy to present a cup of *sake* to his father; the child promptly ascends to heaven, where he becomes a thunder deity.

The second story is from *Hitachi fudoki* (*Fudoki*, pp. 78-80), and relates a similar mysterious birth. In this case a woman called Nuka-bime lives with her brother, Nuka-biko. She is visited by a man she does not know, and after sleeping with him for only one night gives birth to a snake. She puts the snake-child in a bowl, and he grows so quickly that the following day she must put him in a larger bowl; this process is repeated each day until the woman runs out of bowls. She then tells the child she cannot keep him and that he should go to his father. When he hears this the child becomes angry and eventually kills his uncle, Nuka-biko. He unsuccessfully attempts to ascend to heaven, but is doomed to reside in the local mountains, where he is worshipped by the an-

cestors of Nuka-bime.

In each of these tales a woman has a strange visitor and is impregnated under unusual circumstances; in each, the child is the son of a deity; and in each, the child is associated with thunder (reptile) deities. However, the child in the Kamo Shrine origin tale is born in human form and does no harm to any mortal, while the son of Nuka-bime is a snake and kills his uncle. I will not enquire into the reasons that one child is born a mortal and the other a snake, but would like to stress one obvious fact: the deity in its reptilian form does harm to mortals while the deity in human form does not.

Two levels of harm. In his reptilian form the deity poses threats to mortals on two levels: first, as a general violent nature god especially harmful to agriculture, and second as a specific danger to mortal women. Snakes or reptilian deities are often depicted as raping and devouring mortal women. These two aspects of this deity are probably related, as we shall see.

To begin with a brief look at the communal threat posed by the deity in his reptilian form, we might note a story from *Hitachi fudoki* (*Fudoki*, p. 54), in which a snake deity called Yatsu no kami interferes with the efforts of a certain Yawazu no Matachi to clear a field for cultivation. Matachi dons the garb of a warrior and stands at the foot of a nearby mountain, where he draws a line in the ground with his staff, declaring that the area above the line will henceforth be reserved for the deity, but that everything below it will be used for agriculture. He pledges to build a shrine and worship the deity if it leaves him alone, but to kill it if it attempts to interfere further with his farming. After this show of force Matachi has no further problems, and we are told that his descendants are still maintaining the shrine.

In a somewhat similar tale also in *Hitachi fudoki* (*Fudoki*, pp. 445-446) a thunder deity kills a woman working in a field. Her brother, seeking revenge, tracks the deity down and extracts a promise to cease such violent acts.

It is also interesting to note that Susa-no-wo no mikoto, the famous underworld storm deity, is said to have committed all eight of the “Eight Heavenly Sins” against rice farmers, and generally poses a threat to farmers because of his violence. He, too, is associated with snakes.²

Violence against women. The story from *Hitachi fudoki* noted above (*Fudoki*, pp. 445–446) involved, in addition to a deity who interfered in the cultivation of a rice field, a woman who was murdered by a deity. In most cases of deities claiming individual (as opposed to general) victims in Japanese mythology, that victim is a woman. These tales often take the form of a “one-night consort” (*hito-yo zuma*) tale, in which a woman is mated with a deity for one night, then killed and eaten by the deity. I will deal with this cycle in more detail in the following section, but it is worth noting here that these tales are very likely reflections of religious rites involving sacrifices, either actual or symbolic, of women to water deities (Matsumura III, pp. 212–213). In other words, the women may have been sacrificed in order to protect the community from the mischief of the violent deity.

Whatever their source, however, such “one-night consort” tales reveal a deity associated with aggressive and often deadly sexual appetites. In this respect, they resemble the dragon figures of the West; the British dragon, for example, is said to resemble a “large worm” and to be “avid for maidens.”³

SALVATION OF THE SNAKE

Harnessing thunder. Stories about snakes were extremely popular with the early Japanese Buddhists. *Nihon setsuwa bungaku sakuin*

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2. The sins are: breaking down ridges around rice paddies, filling up irrigation ponds, breaking sluices, double planting, putting stakes in others' fields, skinning alive, skinning backwards and defecation in fields. See *Kojiki-Norito*, p. 425; also Philippi, pp. 403–404.
 3. See Briggs 1976, p. 57. It is interesting that Blacker (p. 52) notes that snake deities in Japan have also been described as resembling earthworms.

(pp. 894–897), for example, lists some eighty-two tales in twenty-two primarily Buddhist sources; if stories of related reptiles were to be included, the number would exceed one hundred tales. I will treat in this section only those tales in which the mythical snake is subjugated by the forces of Buddhism, and save the more purely Buddhist reptiles for the following section.

Let us begin with a consideration of the reptile in his guise as a general danger to the communal (agricultural) good. I wish to focus primarily on one tale, *Nihon ryōiki* I. 3, but in the course of this discussion we shall have occasion to introduce other stories as well. The story in question has been entitled “On the strength of the child born from the gratitude of the thunder deity” by *Ryōiki* compiler Kyōkai, and for the purposes of summation we can divide it into four parts:⁴

- A. A farmer holds a metal rod in his hand during a shower that has come up while he is irrigating his fields; this causes the thunder deity to appear before him in the form of a small child and beg for mercy. The deity promises to repay his debt of gratitude to the farmer by granting the farmer a child. The child thus born has a snake coiled around its head.
- B. This child has extraordinary physical strength and bests a prince famous for his own strength in a series of contests.
- C. The child enters the temple Gangō-ji as an apprentice and singlehandedly kills a demon that has been devouring monks attempting to ring the temple bell.
- D. The child, now a lay monk, puts on a display of power to intimidate certain princes who have been damming up the source of water to the temple’s fields. The princes cease their interference and the hero is ordained a monk and called Dōjō.

4. I owe the following four-part division of this tale to Moriya 1978. Moriya and Kurosawa, among others, have written extensively on this story, and I must acknowledge my debt to their scholarship even when I do not agree with their conclusions.

As even a glance at the above summary will show, the story has obvious ties to Japanese myth. It is indeed thought by some scholars (Kurosawa 1976; Moriya 1978, esp. pp. 132-182) to have its immediate origins in myth. However, there is little evidence to establish any direct line of transmission from myth to *setsuwa*, and our time is better spent in tracing the ways in which the tale goes beyond its mythological base. It is in the gaps between the story's mythological parallels and Kyōkai's version that the tale's major interest lies. To state my conclusion concerning the relationship between this tale and Japanese myth at the outset, I am of the opinion that this tale expresses, in symbolic form, many of the problems and their resolutions connected with the introduction of Buddhism to Japan.

I would like to begin with a consideration of the myth patterns that can be found in the tale. The most obvious of these is that of the mortal gaining power over thunder. (More will be said of this below.) The encounter with the violent thunder deity and extracting a promise from him is reminiscent of the *Hitachi fudoki* tale discussed above in which the farmer threatens the deity in order to revenge his sister's death.

As to the motif of the mortal who is able to get control over the thunder deity, we have a clear instance of this in the first tale in *Nihon ryōiki*, "On catching thunder." This story is based on an account in *Nihon shoki* of the exploits of one Chiisakobe no Sugaru, a retainer of the Emperor Yūroku. In the *Nihon shoki* account, Sugaru brings the thunder deity to the emperor in the form of a large snake, whereas in *Nihon ryōiki* there is no indication of his form. Further, the thunder deity in *Ryōiki* is portrayed as something of a bumbling fool humiliated by a mortal, an element lacking in *Nihon shoki*, where the deity is held in more awe. The hero of this tale, as his name Chiisako (literally, "small child") implies, is small of stature, but he also has extraordinary strength, both characteristics of the hero of *Ryōiki* I. 3.

Breaking myth patterns. The important thing about the Gangō-ji

story, however, is not whether it is based on a myth pattern, but how it breaks that pattern to establish its own reality. With the above patterns in mind, then, let us consider how the tale goes beyond the myth.

It will be noted that the story begins and ends in the rice fields, with the problem of irrigation being central to both episodes A and D. The nature of the field has changed, however, shifting from a secular one in episode A to a sacred one (that is, one on Buddhist temple grounds) in episode D. This suggests a contrast between "secular" and "sacred" which is pivotal to the organization of the tale. This can be expressed as follows:

secular half

- A. Violent deity subdued.
- B. Prince defeated.

sacred half

- C. Violent deity subdued.
- D. Princes defeated.

The action in each half of this tale is essentially the same but takes place on a different plane from the corresponding action in the other half. We have first a mythological rendering of this action, then an "instant replay" from a Buddhist perspective.

In the mythological half of the tale, a violent deity is pacified and the child he bestows on the world proves extraordinary; but in the Buddhist half, the violent deity is one that *threatens Buddhism*, and the secular forces brought under control are similarly those *opposed to Buddhism*. Further the force which has made the world safe for Buddhism is not just any hero but one directly linked with the Shinto thunder deity, that erstwhile terrorist of the rice fields already shown (in *Ryōiki* I. 1) to have come under the dominance of the mortal world. To put things rather bluntly, a Shinto deity has not only been subdued, it has been converted to Buddhism and used to pave the way for the new religion. We might call this the "Buddhification" of a Japanese myth.

I will return shortly to the role of the small boy in this "Buddhification" process, but would like to introduce another tale, "About the construction of the original Gangō-ji during the reign of Empress Suiko" (*Konjaku monogatari-shū* XI. 22) at this point.

In this tale we learn about the problems experienced with a large zelkova tree on the proposed site for the temple, Gangō-ji. The tree was the home of some local deities that were reported to have caused the deaths of the first people who tried to fell it. A clever Buddhist monk spends the night near the tree and overhears the deities discussing the Buddhists' efforts. In the course of their conversation the secret of cutting down the tree is revealed. The monk reports what he has discovered and the tree is felled successfully. The Emperor, however, feels compassion for the uprooted deities and has a shrine built for them.

Moriya (1978, p. 166) holds that the demon defeated by the monk Dōjō in episode C of *Ryōiki* I. 3 is one of these defeated deities who has been lingering about the temple to revenge his defeat. There is no direct evidence for this position in the story—the demon there is said to be the evil spirit of a former slave of the temple—but a consideration of the chronology involved sheds some interesting light on the matter.

The reign of Empress Suiko (593–629 according to *Nihon shoki*) saw a large number of Buddhist temples constructed and in general was a time of considerable Buddhist activity. The birth of Dōjō is placed by Kyōkai in the reign of the Emperor Bitatsu (572–586), which would put Dōjō somewhere between the ages of 10 and 24 when the temple was completed in 596, and from this we can deduce that the events related in *Ryōiki* I. 3 would have been seen by Kyōkai as having taken place at very nearly the same time as those related in *Konjaku* XI. 22. It certainly does not seem unreasonable to assume that the bell tower demon and the tree spirits are essentially the same creatures—Shinto deities who attempted to oppose the building of the temple on their native soil.

Going further back, however, the story seems even more closely related to the introduction of Buddhism. As noted, Dōjō was said to have been born during the reign of Emperor Bitatsu, the period during which Buddhism is said in *Nihon shoki* to have been introduced to Japan. Granted that the dates found in *Nihon shoki* are not always reliable to the modern scholar, it must be kept in

mind that this document would have been Kyōkai's major source, and in this regard the accounts in *Nihon shoki* of conflicts between Buddhism and Shinto followers, and those between Prince Regent Shōtoku and various imperial princes take on considerable significance. That is to say, the fact that Kyōkai locates Dōjō during a time when there were (or were thought to be) actual conflicts between forces of Buddhism and Shinto gives Dōjō even more significance as a mediating force between Buddhism and Shinto.

I do not think it wide of the mark to suggest that in this tale Dōjō symbolizes the conversion of the "spirit of Japan" to Buddhism, which in turn allowed the new religion to spread throughout the country.

Thunder reborn. According to Moriya, this Buddhist hero is not simply a child bestowed by a Shinto deity; he is the reincarnation of the deity himself. This interpretation of the nature of Dōjō is, it should be noted, based on a reading of the *Ryōiki* text that is not generally accepted, but the theory bears investigation nonetheless. The passage in question is the thunder deity's response to the farmer's question, "How will you repay your debt to me [if I do not kill you]?"

The deity replies: "*nanji ni yose ko wo haramashimete mukuimu.*" This response is understood by the editors of the *Nihon koten bungaku taikei* edition of *Ryōiki* to mean, "I will use you as a vehicle to receive a child, and thus repay my debt" (p. 71), but Moriya argues that the insertion of the word *yose* (which he reads *yosete*) implies that the thunder deity intends to use the farmer as a vehicle through which he himself can be reborn (Moriya 1978, p. 140).

The matter is far from simple to resolve, but it does seem to me that Moriya's reading of the text appears plausible enough and in any event, that even if the child is not *the* reincarnation of the thunder deity he is certainly an aspect of that deity. His size is apparently smaller than average and his strength greater than average, and he has been born with a snake coiled around his head; all of these attributes are associated with the thunder deity.

The crucial element here is the *on*, or obligation, that the deity feels towards the farmer when the farmer spares his life. In mythological sources mortals are frequently able to get the better of deities (especially reptilian deities) if the mortals are angry enough to take violent steps of their own. The most they ever gain from these victories, however, is a promise that the deity will cease his anti-social, destructive behavior. In this case, though, things clearly go beyond the traditional limits. The deity not only ceases his undesirable behavior, he acknowledges his obligation to the farmer and repays it.

The idea of *on* is central to the Buddhist concept of humanity (Nakamura, pp. 62–63), and by embracing this precept the thunder deity is in effect embracing Buddhism. One might then argue that it is for this reason he is able to be reborn as a Buddhist hero. Kyōkai himself seems to follow this line of interpretation when he says at the end of the story, “It is clear, then—this strength was something accumulated by his acts of virtue in former lives. This is a miracle that took place *in Japan*” (italics added).

Thus, by accepting the idea of *on*, even the most “Japanese” of deities is able to gain salvation and become a Buddhist hero. To Kyōkai, whose foremost concern is to show that Buddhism has meaning in a Japanese context, such a story would have had a strong appeal, and it is not surprising that he takes particular pains to note that this was indeed a “Japanese” miracle.

Indeed, it is not insignificant that the first three tales in *Nihon ryōiki* deal with mortals’ relationships with deities, while only in the fourth story do we move to “Buddhism proper,” with the mandatory tale of Prince Regent Shōtoku, generally interpreted as the person who brought Buddhism to Japan.⁵

The sexual snake. The sexually dangerous reptilian deity makes a

5. Later *setsuwa* collections such as *Honchō ōjō gokuraku ki*, *Dai-nihon hokke genki* and *Konjaku monogatari-shū* begin with stories of Shōtoku, for example, and it is interesting to note that Kyōkai alone felt there was something of importance to deal with before the appearance of this historical Buddhist hero.

number of appearances in *setsuwa* collections, and we can note that the ideas of *on* and the initial dissemination of Buddhism in Japan prove important in the *Nihon ryōiki* treatment of this aspect of the mythological snake just as they did in the tale discussed above. Let us begin our consideration of this snake with a look at *Ryōiki* II. 33, "How a woman was eaten by an evil demon."

In this tale we are told of a beautiful maiden named Yorozu no Ko, who has refused all of her numerous suitors for reasons not mentioned. She is courted by a man who offers several expensive gifts and finally consents to become his bride. On the night of the consummation of the marriage her parents hear her cry out three times, "It hurts!"; thinking her to be merely sexually inexperienced they pay these cries no heed. When on the following morning she fails to come out of her room her mother goes to investigate and discovers that she has been devoured by her bridegroom, and only her head and one finger remain. In addition, the carts full of silk brought by the man have been transformed to old wood. Kyōkai tells us that this is an "unusual event," and says that some people called it the mysterious work of a deity, while others hold that it was done by a demon.

This tale fits into the mythological tradition of stories about women wed to a deity for one night (*hito-yo zuma*) who are killed and frequently eaten by their immortal bridegrooms. It is in many ways similar to a story found in *Hizen fudoki* (*Fudoki*, p. 396), in which a woman named Otohi-hime is visited by a man who resembles her husband even though her husband left some days before to participate in a military campaign. In this tale the woman is suspicious of her one-night lover and follows him to a mountain pond, where she finds a snake-like creature who recites a poem to the effect that he has had one night with her and will now take her "home"; he then pulls her into the pond. There is enough similarity in the poem in this episode with a poem in the *Ryōiki* tale to cause Moriya to suspect the two tales are closely related (1974, pp. 165-168).

The *Fudoki* tale is clearly tied to some kind of religious ritual.

Before the appearance of the demon lover the young woman goes to the top of a peak, where she waves her scarf to call back her departing husband. We are readily drawn to imagine a shamaness engaged in a ritual to summon her immortal lover in this scene. Although no such ritualistic overtones can be found in the *Ryōiki* tale, it is important to note the fact that the woman has refused a large number of suitors from good families, as though she were saving herself for this deity.

The *Ryōiki* story is linked only tenuously to Buddhism by Kyōkai, who informs us at the end that the fate of Yorozu no Ko was determined by her "past actions," although he does not elaborate. An examination of two similar tales from *Ryōiki*, however, will bring us to some understanding of why "past activities" might have led the unfortunate Yorozu no Ko to her untimely end. The tales in question, II. 8 and II. 12, are quite similar but each contains unique elements important to our understanding of the tale cycle as a whole, and hence deserve to be treated separately.

In II. 8 we are told of a holy woman named Okisome no omi Taime, the daughter of a nun, who out of great devotion to Buddhism chose to remain a virgin and to go each day to the mountains to collect herbs for the holy man Gyōki (also read Gyōgi; 668-749). One day she sees a snake swallowing a frog and implores it to release its captive, promising to become its wife if it will do so. The snake assents to that promise and comes later to consummate the marriage but the woman is afraid and will not let it in her house. She goes to Gyōki for advice and he tells her to maintain her faith in Buddhism and honor her promise to the snake. After reaffirming this faith the woman meets a strange old man with a crab. She buys the crab from him, paying with her clothing, and sets it free in a Buddhist ceremony. That evening when the snake forces its way into her house through the roof the crab kills it to repay his debt of gratitude to the woman. The old man, Kyōkai informs us, was probably an incarnation of Buddha.

The situation is very similar in II. 12. Here the woman first releases eight crabs, then, when she encounters the snake, promises

first to give it offerings, then to worship it as a deity, and finally to marry it. At this last promise the snake releases the frog. The heroine in this tale also goes to visit Gyōki, and is given the same advice as the heroine of II. 8. When the snake appears to claim his bride the eight crabs released by the woman earlier tear it to pieces.

That the snake in these stories has the status of a deity can be seen in the sequence of promises made by the heroine of II. 12. She promises first to make offerings, then to worship it, and finally to marry it, all of which is roughly parallel to the way violent deities were treated by their mortal victims. The female shrine attendant, or shamaness, was in charge of the worship of the deity and was also held to have a sexual relationship with it. The picture of the woman as sacrifice to the deity is clear in both II. 8 and II. 33, where Taime and Yorozu no Ko are said to be both beautiful and virginal; each has shunned sexual contact out of some sense of mission.

Taime, however, has dedicated her life to the service of Buddhism, while Yorozu no Ko seems more impressed by secular riches, and hence the fates of the two differ accordingly. This lack of accumulation of merit is doubtless what Kyōkai had in mind when he called Yorozu no Ko's fate the result of "past activities."

Role of Gyōki. The immediate salvation of the women in these tales is brought about by the *on* felt by the crabs they have released. This *on* has been triggered by the compassion shown by the woman involved, but it is not a simple case of repayment of *on*, for the holy monk Gyōki is brought into each story to refine the women's compassion into a more Buddhistic expression. Such a rhetorical strategy was not necessary in I. 3, in which the thunder deity repays his *on*, for there the object of salvation was the deity himself, and in this case the objects of salvation are the women whose actions have caused the feelings of *on* in the first place. By bringing in Gyōki and further defining the action of these two tales in Buddhist terms, Kyōkai is in effect taking no chances that

the stories be understood as having taken place outside of a Buddhist context, which is, of course, the way the story is normally understood in its oral versions.

Gyōki was very popular with editors of *setsuwa* collections. There are seven tales about him in *Nihon ryōiki* alone, and numerous other stories in a variety of other collections. But these two *Ryōiki* stories are the only ones in which he is specifically associated with either snakes or the repayment of *on*, and some consideration of his special role here is undoubtedly necessary for a fuller understanding of the tales.

Best known for his efforts in popularizing Buddhism among the people, Gyōki was also associated with a variety of good works such as building bridges. His exalted stature was nearly equal to that of Prince Regent Shōtoku, and it is not surprising that Kyōkai finds in him the ideal person to serve as the Buddhist catalyst in the two tales under consideration. In both of them Gyōki makes his appearance *after* the woman has made her marriage pledge, and in both cases his advice is the same: offer no physical resistance and renew faith in Buddhism.

The problem faced by the women in these tales is one created by the values of ancient (pre-Buddhist) Japan, but the solution counseled by Gyōki is a Buddhist one, radical for its time. The structure of II. 8 is particularly revealing in this sense. It may be capsulized as follows:

1. The woman (Taime) meets the problem;
2. she takes her problem to Gyōki;
3. she follows his advice and reaffirms her faith in Buddhism;
4. Buddha sends a messenger who at the same time is both a test of her compassion and the means of her salvation;
5. she passes this test and is saved from danger.

Had it been the frog initially saved by the woman that repaid its *on*, Gyōki's role would have disappeared and the story would have lost its Buddhist significance. We will, incidentally, encounter the "unlikely messenger" element in a later cycle of tales.

The enemy without. In these *Ryōiki* tales the evil or danger encountered by the characters originates *outside* of the characters, and the means of escape from the problem also come primarily from outside the characters, although there is an inner quality to the characters that enables the escape mechanism to come into play. Essentially the escape entails the accumulation of a reservoir of good, in the form of good works and a faith in Buddhism, and not in direct and active resistance to the danger.

In time, however, the perception of both the danger and the salvation changes, with both coming to be seen as *internal* rather than external matters. This new interpretation appears to be influenced by the advent of a more “Buddhist” serpent, one which seems to fall largely outside the patterns described above. It is to that serpent that I would like now to turn my attention.

THE BUDDHIST SNAKE

The snake and reincarnation. The Buddhist snake, which we can identify fairly confidently as belonging to a different tradition from those already discussed, is basically associated with reincarnation. Stories in this tradition tend to center around monks but women on occasion also assume the role of protagonists. The basic plot of such tales is simply that those who have placed too much attachment on things of this life are likely to find themselves as snakes in the life to come. Such tales are to be found in Japan from the earliest period—there is an example in *Nihon ryōiki*—but do not seem to have come completely of age until *Konjaku monogatari-shū* (ca. 1100) and later collections. They are closely associated with Amida and his Pure Land, and tend to emphasize the dangers for those who wish to be reborn in the Western Paradise of dwelling on things in this world.

In the sole example of this type of tale found in *Ryōiki* (II. 38; the story is also found in *Konjaku*, XX. 24), we read of a monk who tells his disciples not to open his door for three years after his death. However, forty-nine days after his death (seven days in *Konjaku*) a large snake appears near his door. His disciples realize

that this is the reincarnation of their greedy master and open the door in spite of his dying command, where they find some money their master has hidden. They realize that the monk's attachment to this money is what has caused his having been reborn as a snake, so they use it to do Buddhist works in hopes of saving him. We are not told if their efforts were successful.

The *Konjaku* compiler, in words not used in *Ryōiki*, says that this monk practiced Buddhism diligently but was not enlightened, and calls the monk's attitude "stupid." There is no mention in the tale of the monk's aspirations for the life to come, nor any indication of whether he was successfully delivered from his reptilian existence by the works of his disciples.

In contrast to this monk the hero of *Konjaku* XX. 23 (a story which seems to have been intended by the compiler of *Konjaku* to serve as a contrast to XX. 24) is very holy, a man who has earnestly prayed for rebirth in the Western Paradise of Amida but is reborn as a small snake in spite of his enlightenment and lifetime of devotion. The reason for his misfortune is that just before his death he noticed a small jar and wondered which of his disciples would get it after he was gone. A similar hero appears in *Konjaku* XIV. 1. In this case the monk had some money which he had decided to save for his disciples to use after his death, but because he forgot to tell them about it he was reborn as a snake coiled around the place in the roof where he had hidden it. Both of these monks are said to have shed their snake skins and to have achieved final rebirth in the Western Paradise because of the efforts exerted by those they left behind; these efforts amount to dedicating sutras in behalf of the dead monks.

Role of the Lotus Sutra. The sutra dedicated for this monks was the *Lotus Sutra* (*Hokkekyō*), which was seen as being especially effective in dealing with snakes. This is probably due in part at least to the influence of a mid-eleventh century *setsuwa* collection, *Dai-nihon hokke genki* [Japanese miracles wrought by the Lotus Sutra], which, as the name implies, was compiled to inspire faith

in the *Lotus Sutra* and the miracles with which it was associated in Japan. The compiler of the collection is generally taken to be the monk Chingen. Of its one hundred twenty-nine tales, eleven are concerned with snakes, all of which were also used by the compiler of the later *Konjaku monogatari-shū*. *Hokke genki*, however, is more concerned with recounting miracles than with stories of reincarnation, and there are thus only two tales in the collection which might be called examples of the Buddhist snake. In both, the heroes are saved from their snake existence by the power of the *Lotus Sutra* and the tales are best read as testimonies to the power of that sutra rather than as tales directly concerned with Pure Land belief.

The stories, as noted, come from a more purely Buddhist tradition, and do not seem directly linked to pre-Buddhist mythological stories about snakes, but there are some interesting points in common which are worth noting here. The first of these concerns the associations the snake has in the stories.

As we have seen, snakes in the mythological tradition tend to be associated with the land of the dead. This is, of course, also the case in the tales of the Buddhist snake recounted above, where an individual becomes a snake after death. Hence the stories are at least compatible with Japanese tradition in this regard.

There is one other area in which the stories maintain this compatibility, namely the habitat of the snake when it visits the land of the living. In *Konjaku* XX. 23, for example, the snake is reborn in a small jar, and in various other stories, most notably *Konjaku* XIV. 1, it is found in the roof. We have seen a *fudoki* tale in which the snake child of a mortal woman was kept in a series of jars; in the *Ryōiki* tales about women who are able to escape their snake bridegrooms the snake entered the house from the roof.

None of these points indicates "influence" from the mythological story patterns and in all probability the similarity is purely accidental. It is, however, interesting to note that even in these seemingly unrelated tales some effort has been made to put the stories in a context more readily appreciated by a contemporary

audience. Further, these elements of containment and the entering the house through the roof (much as the spirits of the dead were thought to enter the houses of the living) prove to be important in later tales about snakes as well; in my opinion their presence here underscores the associations the snake has with the dead on the one hand, and the soul on the other. More will be said about this in later sections.

THE MYTHO-BUDDHIST HYBRID

The one-night consort revisited. What happens when the Buddhist snake meets its mythical counterpart head on? The tales dealing with such encounters are considerably more complex than those we have been discussing to this point, and they allow a far wider range of Buddhist interpretations.

As an example, let us consider *Konjaku monogatari-shū* XIV. 4, in which a woman, unnamed but said to be of great beauty, spends a single night with the Emperor Shōmu, who finds her charming and rewards her with money. Shortly after their night together both the Emperor and the woman die. The woman specifies that she is to be buried together with the money she received from the Emperor.

Thereafter, the story informs us, strange things start happening at a certain temple in the Nara area: "All who went to that temple died without returning, so that people stopped worshipping there. Everyone thought it extremely frightening." Hearing this, a certain famous governmental official visits the temple and recites spells during the night. He is visited by the spirit of the woman, who begs him for help. She has attempted to seek the aid of others who visited the temple, she says, but they all died of fright at her appearance. She wishes him to liberate her from her present suffering by digging up the money buried with her and using it to dedicate a sutra reading. The minister does as she requests and finds the cash in her grave, protected by a large snake. He commissions a dedication of the *Lotus Sutra* and the woman is reborn in a Buddhist paradise.

The woman in this tale seems rather closely related to the one-night consorts (*hito-yo zuma*) of the mythological stories we have discussed. She is beautiful and charming, is embraced by an extraordinary lover for one night and dies soon afterwards, just as many of these women do. However, the tale can also be read as a story of the Buddhist snake, for the woman is reborn as a snake because of the attachment she had for the money presented her by the Emperor.

On yet another level, her spirit is confined to appearances in a Buddhist temple, where—intentionally or unintentionally—it kills worshipers; in this sense the story is reminiscent of *Ryōiki* I. 3, in which the defeated Shinto deity interferes with worship at a Buddhist temple.

In short, the *Konjaku* compiler has taken most of the elements we have found in snake stories from other traditions and fused them into a new product, a true hybrid. It is worth noting that this is the fourth tale in volume XIV of *Konjaku* and that the preceding three tales have also featured serpents (we saw XIV. 1 above), so that it serves as a fitting climax to this series.

It is not only the fact that all the elements of snake stories we have seen thus far are included in this tale that makes it a true hybrid. The compiler here has set about reinterpreting the nature of the danger posed by the serpent. In the Buddhist renditions of tales about mythological snakes salvation is offered to the *victims* of the deities. In *Ryōiki* II. 8 and II. 12, for instance, the women are able to escape through their commitment to Buddhism, and in *Ryōiki* I. 3 the defeat of the demon at the temple means that monks will no longer have to die. In the Buddhist snake tales, on the other hand, salvation is offered to the *snake itself*, which is not pictured as a violent deity, but rather as the unfortunate victim of his worldly desires.

In this hybrid story, however, salvation is offered to *both* the victims (the minister recites Buddhist spells to protect himself from the spirit, and his pacification of it through Buddhism means that people will no longer have to die) and to the snake itself (after the

Lotus Sutra is dedicated the woman is able to achieve rebirth in a Buddhist paradise). Further, the salvation is not effected by force, as was the case in the earlier stories, but by compassion and wisdom. The nature of the danger is also treated differently here: the minister's heroism reveals that what was perceived as a danger by the people of the world was actually harmless, and that the people who died, perished of their own fear, and not due to some external cause. While the violence involved is still shown to have originated external to the victims, it is not any external force that actually killed them.

Snakes, monks and caves. A similar story which brings us to an even more internally based perception of evil is *Konjaku XIII. 17*. This tale relates how a monk who specializes in the recitation of the *Lotus Sutra* spends the night in a cave on his way to a pilgrimage at Kumano (see also *Hokke genki I. 14*; the tale is virtually identical in both collections). Frightened by the cave, the man decides to recite the *Lotus Sutra* for protection. A large snake appears and seems about to devour him, but at the recitation of the sutra it disappears. After a pounding rain, a man comes to the cave and thanks the monk, telling him that the rain drops were really tears of repentance, and that he has now been released from his evil existence.

As in the mythical snake stories, the creature appears before the man in the form of a snake when he intends to do him harm. However, the snake is pacified by the power of the *Lotus Sutra* and makes a second appearance in the form of a human. Interestingly, this is a man whose features the monk cannot discern, which is a vagueness rather similar to the descriptions of the unknown males who visit women married to snake deities. This much of the story, in any event, is compatible with the mythological tales.

We may further note that this tale lacks any explanation of why the snake was in that particular location, or of why it was a snake, and in this sense the tale differs from that of the Emperor's consort, discussed above. There is no doubt that this snake—again unlike

the spirit of the Emperor's consort—is truly evil. The man informs the monk: “I have been living in this cave for several years, taking lives and killing the people who came here, but now, because I have heard you recite the *Lotus Sutra*, I have given up this evil heart and will turn towards good.” In this case Buddhism is able to save both the monster and its intended victim.

In *Konjaku* XIV. 4, the story of the Emperor's consort, the apparent evil proved not to be evil after all, but to be merely a misunderstood spirit, albeit one originating outside of its “victims.” This story, by way of contrast, depicts evil which is indeed evil, but even here we cannot say with certainty that this is an evil which has originated outside of its intended victims. We will gain a deeper understanding of the story through a consideration of *Konjaku* XIV. 17, another tale of a monk whose main religious practice is the recitation of the *Lotus Sutra*.

The monk in *Konjaku* XIV. 17, never able to memorize the final two volumes of the sutra, in frustration closes himself up for ninety days and prays earnestly for enlightenment regarding his lapses of memory. He is told that in a previous existence he had been a snake and was on the point of devouring a monk, who for protection began reciting the *Lotus Sutra*. The snake listened to the recital and gave up his meal, but dawn broke before the monk had recited the final two volumes. As a result of the experience, the snake was reborn as a monk, but will never be able to learn the final two volumes, which he did not hear.

This tale is closely related to XIII. 17, and one is at once tempted to speculate that the monk in story XIV. 17 was indeed the snake in XIII. 17. While there is no direct evidence for such an assertion, there are certain elements in the two tales that bear a closer look. Primary among them is the idea of enclosure.

Frustrated at his inability to memorize the final two volumes of the *Lotus Sutra*, the hero of XIV. 17 practices enclosure (*komori*) for ninety days, reciting various spells and incantations. This he does in order to increase his spiritual power so that he might at least understand why he is unable to learn the sutra. He is re-

warded for his devoted practice with an insight into his past (in this case, a past life); in other words, the result of his enclosure is greater self-awareness. He comes, as it were, face to face with his own former evils and is able to understand how they affected his current condition. The hero of XIII. 17, who meets a snake in a deserted cave during the course of a religious pilgrimage, has had an essentially similar experience.

So we must be prepared to interpret the experiences of the monk in the cave in *Konjaku* XIII. 17 as self-revelatory. He is, it must be remembered, on his way to Kumano, the site of ascetic religious practices designed to accumulate spiritual power. In the course of this pilgrimage he crosses, in effect, into another world; the cave can be thought of as the entrance to the underworld. This new world is, according to the text, "a world far removed from people." There he recites a magic formula (the *Lotus Sutra*), and it is not surprising that he has this remarkable experience. His meeting with the snake can, I think, be thought of as a face to face encounter with his own past evil acts.

The monk resolves to place his faith totally in the *Lotus Sutra*: when the snake appears he says, "I am to lose my life suddenly here to this viper. However, I will not fall into an evil existence, but will be reborn in the Pure Land by the strength of the *Lotus Sutra*." This act of devotion and complete faith cancels out his evil and the monk is elevated to a higher level of awareness. If the cave can be thought of as a womb, he has been reborn on a higher level of existence. While the evil in this tale apparently exists independently of the monk—there can be no doubt of the existence of the snake—it nonetheless must be thought of as evil which stemmed initially from the monk himself and had therefore to be subdued by him, with the aid of the *Lotus Sutra*.

In any event, all three of these tales depict both victim and aggressor as being saved through the forces of Buddhism. Moreover, it is not at all clear that victim and aggressor are to be taken as separate entities, especially in the stories of the monks. The snake has gone through a process of internalization, leading the way

to the next logical step: if the snake is one aspect of the individual, then it can also be one aspect of the Buddha, and hence serve as the actual agent of salvation of the individual.

THE SNAKE OF SALVATION

Dragons, demons and monks. Let us begin with a look at a tale that does not appear very "Buddhist," *Konjaku monogatari-shū* XX. 11. In this story a dragon is sunning himself near his home in the form of a small snake when he is suddenly attacked and captured by a *tengu*, or mountain demon. This dragon is unable to counter the attack because he lacks the water necessary to release his powers. The *tengu*, on the other hand, is unable to devour him on the spot because of the dragon-strength inherent in the snake, so it puts the snake-dragon in its lair—a mountain cave—and goes off to Mt. Hiei, returning presently with a monk he captured while the monk was washing his hands. In fact, the monk was taken so quickly that he is still clutching his water bowl, and there is a drop of water left in it. The dragon uses the water to assume the form of a small boy, and saves the monk. He then goes off to find the *tengu*, which has assumed the form of an itinerate monk and is begging on the road, and kicks it to death.

The *Konjaku* compiler notes here: "In truth, the dragon was able to prolong his life because of the virtue of the monk; and the monk was able to return to his mountain because of the strength of the dragon. This was all a matter of fate stemming from previous existences."

As noted, this tale does not seem at first reading to be very "Buddhist," mostly because there is no account of the power of the sutras. However, the compiler praises the monk's "virtue" (*toku*, which should be thought of as power accumulated by spiritual purity), and the implication is that an ordinary person—one without the special protection of Buddhism—would have been unable to achieve such a rescue.

The fact that events take place in a mountain cave, as was the case in *Konjaku* XIII. 17, provides a further point of comparison.

And the snake's assumption of the form of a small boy in order to save the monk is consistent with what we have seen in previous tales about the interaction between mortals and snakes. Finally, it is significant that the *Konjaku* compiler explains the events in reference to former lives. The snake, as we have seen, has strong associations with reincarnated monks, and it must therefore follow that it cannot be a *totally* bad creature. But the important thing to keep in mind about this story is that both snake and monk are mutual victims of yet another outside danger, and that it is actually the snake who has saved the monk in this case, rather than the monk having saved the snake. (It is, of course, the monk's virtue which enables the snake to make the rescue.)

The snake in the vat. In another *Konjaku* tale a snake indirectly affects the salvation of a mortal. This is *Konjaku* XIX. 21, in which a monk uses temple rice to make himself some *sake*. When he looks in the vats to see if the *sake* is ready to drink, he finds a number of snakes crawling around inside and orders all the vats discarded in a field. Three men, notoriously heavy drinkers, happen to pass by, look in the vats and discover that they contain *sake*. They are somewhat worried about it—if the *sake* were good, why would it have been discarded, they ask themselves—but try it anyway. It is delicious, and they have a good long drunk with it. The monk hears about their experience and realizes that this was a warning to him. He takes it to heart, and his Buddhist faith increases. The *Konjaku* compiler informs us that this was clearly the work of Buddha.

In this tale the snakes appear only to the evil monk, and they have been sent by Buddha. It is unclear whether or not they are actually his incarnations, but there is no question that he has used them to advance the salvation of this monk. When the monk first sees the snakes he does not recognize them as reflections of his misdeeds, but when he hears of the experiences of the three drunks, he understands their nature. Clearly the snake here is a tangible manifestation of wrong-doing, and contact with it actually

helps the monk improve.

Kannon as a reptile. This use of the snake symbol finds consummate expression in *Konjaku monogatari-shū* XVI. 6, a story that was particularly popular with compilers of *setsuwa* collections, for reasons that I think will be obvious. It tells of a man who is gathering hawk chicks from the nest in precarious surroundings, with the intention of selling them later. A neighbor has assisted him by lowering him over a cliff in a basket to a spot where he can get out and gather up the chicks, which he then sends back up in the basket. Instead of then sending the basket back down, however, the neighbor simply leaves, abandoning the man to die on the narrow ledge of the cliff. The Bodhisattva Kannon, to whom the the unfortunate man had paid regular homage every month, takes pity on him and assumes the form of a snake to save his life. After his rescue the protagonist shaves his head and becomes a monk, giving up his evil ways.

Salvation is presented here in a dramatic form, and bears analyzing in some detail. Alone on the ledge and facing death, the man recognizes and confesses his own past wrong-doings:

For years I have caught these hawk chicks just before they could fly and, binding their feet so they could not fly away, used them to catch fowl. It is because of this sin that I am now about to be punished with death. My wish is that the compassionate Kannon I have revered for these many years will, even though this life of mine has now come to its end, keep me from falling into Hell in the life to come, and greet me in the Western Paradise.

When he makes this confession and plea for mercy a snake emerges from the water below him and climbs up to him, apparently to devour him. The man decides, "I would rather die by falling into the ocean than be eaten by a snake," and drawing his sword he pierces the head of the snake. The snake then carries him up to the top of the cliff, where it disappears.

The story states explicitly that the snake is a manifestation of Kannon, who has taken this form out of compassion in order that the man might be saved. On first glance, this appears to be a rather unusual method of salvation indeed, particularly since the first thing the snake does is try to devour the man. If we consider the circumstances of the snake's appearance, however, the act becomes easier to understand.

The snake appears only *after* the man has acknowledged his past evil and begged for compassion in the life to come; this act of confession was necessary to move the Bodhisattva to this act of compassion. Further, when the snake appears the man runs it through, intending to kill it, thereby showing a willingness to abandon his attachments to life and his past evils. His words are remarkably similar to those of the monk who encounters the snake in the cave in *Konjaku* XIII. 17.

It is only when he has taken the two steps of confession and repudiation of past evils that he can be saved. It is significant that the man does not hold his neighbor responsible for his danger, even though the neighbor was the immediate cause of his problem. The man clearly recognizes that the neighbor is only an agent, and that the true source of his problem is not any outside element, but his own evil.

Here we have come full circle. The snake is, as is so often the case, a symbol of the man's attachments to life and his past misdeeds; it is also an immediate danger to his life. At the same time that it is a symbol of his past evils, though, it is also an incarnation of the Bodhisattva Kannon, thus demonstrating dramatically that there is good in evil and that the recognition and repudiation of that evil in the self can enable one to turn the evil around and make it work in one's own favor. "Evil" can either devour us or save us, depending on our own attitude towards it.

CONCLUSION

"We have met the enemy," says one of the characters created by the cartoonist Walt Kelly, "and it is us." Ultimately, this is what

the tales of snakes we have examined in these pages have to say to us.

The early Shinto, or mythical snake, was basically a danger originating outside the individual, and needing to be dealt with as one would deal with other violent forces of nature. It posed a general threat to the agricultural community and a specific threat to human women, and was the manifestation of the violent aspect of those deities connected with thunder, water and the dead. In some ways, its existence must have had a comforting effect: it was the "enemy," but it was not "us."

The earliest Buddhist snake, on the other hand, was indeed "us," but it was not the "enemy." That is to say, it was a symbol of attachment to things of this world, and transformation into a snake was that which happened to individuals who valued such things too highly. But it posed no threat to innocent bystanders. It merely lurked behind the scenes as the symbol of the evil inside us all.

Interestingly, it was mostly Buddhist monks and women who needed to fear the snake within themselves. We have seen that women were associated with the mythical snake, as victims of its sexual appetites; monks, on the other hand, had been victims of the same serpent in its guise as the angry deity, disgruntled at its defeat by the superior forces of Buddhism.

The defeat of this snake—which, in the story of the temple Gangō-ji, amounted to its conversion to Buddhism—was significant in *Nihon ryōiki* for two main reasons. First, as we saw in the Gangō-ji tale, it gave the Buddhists a sort of hold over the spiritual forces of Shinto. The conversion of the thunder deity both established the Buddhists' claims to dominance over the native deities, and also allowed them to propagate their religion in freedom. Secondly, as we saw in the tales featuring Gyōki and the would-be brides of snakes, Buddhism offered mortals the means of escaping the dangers posed by the mythical snake.

But the Buddhist snake and the mythical snake are mated by enterprising compilers of tale collections and eventually give birth to a unique hybrid, one which is at the same time both "us" and

the “enemy.” Now violence is no longer seen as something impersonal, arising from somewhere outside the individual, but rather as something arising from within. This means that Buddhism was suddenly able to save not only the intended victim of violence, but its perpetrator as well, in a single stroke. This leads to a reassessment of the nature of violence.

Buddhist stories about *shukke* (“taking of the Buddhist vows”) generally center around extraordinary experiences, for people do not enter Buddhism as a matter of daily course, but must be pushed into it by forces outside their normal control. This is the case with the snake tales, as well; encounters with the violence posed by the serpents lead to the salvation of the people involved because they are so frightened that they take unusual, direct action they would never have considered under normal circumstances. But if this the case, then we must reconsider the snake—if it has pushed us to enter Buddhism or attain a greater level of self awareness, it is difficult to say that it is completely “bad.”

Indeed, as we saw in the tale of the man gathering hawk chicks, the snake might even be a direct manifestation of the Bodhisattva Kannon. If in the *Ryōiki* Gangō-ji story we can say that the snake *has been converted* to Buddhism, here we must say that the snake *has converted* the hero of the story to Buddhism. The snake, in this instance, has been sent by Buddha so that we might understand our misdeeds and be liberated from them. It is still the evil within us, but once we have developed the ability to actually see this evil, we are able to deal with it effectively.

GLOSSARY

<i>aramitama</i> 荒御魂	<i>fudoki</i> 風土記
Chiisakobe no Sugaru 小子部栖輕	Gangō-ji 元興寺
Chingen 鎮源	Gyōki (Gyōgi) 行基
<i>Dai-nihon hokke genki</i> 大日本法華驗記	<i>Hitachi no kuni no fudoki</i> 常陸国風土記
Dōjō 道場	<i>hito-yo zuma</i> 一夜妻

W. Michael KELSEY

<i>Hizen no kuni no fudoki</i> 肥前国風土記	<i>Okisome no omi Taime</i> 置染臣綱女
<i>Hokkekyō</i> 法華經	<i>Otohi-hime</i> 弟日姫
<i>Konjaku monogatari-shū</i> 今昔物語集	<i>sake</i> 酒
<i>komori</i> 籠	<i>setsuwa shū</i> 說話集
<i>Kyōkai (Keikai)</i> 景戒	<i>shukke</i> 出家
<i>nanji ni yose ko wo haramishimete muku- imu</i> 寄於汝令胎子而報	<i>tengu</i> 天狗
<i>Nihon ryōiki</i> 日本靈異記	<i>toku</i> 徳
<i>Nihon shoki</i> 日本書紀	<i>Yamashiro no kuni no fudoki</i> 山城国風 土記
<i>Nuka-biko</i> 努賀毗古	<i>Yatsu no kami</i> 夜刀神
<i>Nuka-bime</i> 努賀毗咩	<i>Yawazu no Matachi</i> 箭括麻多智
<i>on</i> 恩	<i>Yorozu no Ko</i> 万子

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