

The View of Spirits as Seen
in the Bon Observances of the Shima Region

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The present paper deals with the meaning to be given to the *shinmō* 新亡, i.e., the spirits of people who died in the preceding year, in the context of Japan's traditional ancestor veneration practices. It is based on field work done on Bon observances in the so called five Kamo villages (Funatsu-chō, Iwakura-chō, Kōchi-chō, Matsuo-chō, and Shiraki-chō in Toba City), which is a district of rural villages in the inland part of the Shima region, Mie Prefecture.

Characteristics of the Bon Observances in the Kamo Villages

When the season of the Bon Festival for the dead comes in August, folk performing arts for pacifying and sending off the spirits of the dead all over Japan can be witnessed. Also in the five Kamo villages, on the evening of 15 August the young people make music, chant the *nenbutsu* 念仏 and at the end of the festival put fire to the *hashiramatsu* 柱松. These rituals of *dainenbutsu* and *hashiramatsu* are conducted for sending off the spirits of the dead and are held in grand style. The make-up of the dancers, the place, the instruments used, the music, and the like are all *nenbutsu* rituals to soothe and drive away the *arajōrō* 荒精霊 or unruly spirits that have been preserved since ages past. By acquiring a better understanding of the religious meaning of the *dainenbutsu* and *hashiramatsu* rituals we might also deepen our insight into the religious mentality of the Japanese and their view of ancestral spirits (*sorei* 祖霊).

The process of the *nenbutsu* ritual

Trying to soothe, through offerings of music and dance, the unruly spirits of people who recently died or met an untimely death is an old custom in Japanese life. Magical performances for the repose of souls apparently already existed in the early Heian period (from 794 till about 860), but they became popular especially in the middle of the tenth century, when wandering priests such as Kūya 空也 propagated the *odori nenbutsu* 踊り念仏, dances accompanied by the sound of bells and drums while reciting Buddhist prayers. The *nenbutsu* of Kūya was a dance performed for the bones of the deceased which were abandoned along the roads, and for those who had died from epidemics. Apart from these, there were also performing arts of the nobility such as *bugaku* 舞楽, *zatsugi* 雑伎, *sangaku* 散楽, *gagaku* 雅楽, etc. performed at *goryō-e* 御霊会, ceremonies held in order to prevent epidemics and poor crops due to the curses of revengeful spirits of people who had been murdered or, after acquittal, had died in exile. While *goryō-i* was a sort of national ceremony, the rituals to placate the revengeful spirits performed by the common people were means to protect themselves by primitive magic. There were also memorial services held for the family ancestors and services for assuring one's own safe rebirth.

The *dainenbutsu* ritual consisted of chanting sutras, lecturing on the sutras, prayers and austerities, sermons, and other Buddhist rituals, and also of *nenbutsu* choirs, dances, and plays. Among them the *odori nenbutsu* forms the core of our country's folk performing arts. One can divide the *odori nenbutsu* in roughly two types, the Ryōnin 良忍 type and the Kūya type. The former type has a refined character and is performed attuned to the music of the *nenbutsu* of the Yūzū Nenbutsu 融通念仏 sect, while the latter takes on the form of primitive magical dances for soothing the spirits of the dead. The more primitive the dances are, the stronger the magical elements are for pacifying the spirits by trampling them and of driving them forcefully away. On the other hand, when the religious elements grow stronger, the dances take on the form of sending the spirits away by entertaining and consoling them by means of dances, music, *nenbutsu* recitations, and the like. Thus in order to placate the spirits, magical actions such as jumping around and trampling the ground, magical formulas such as *nenbutsu* and *hayashi kotoba* 囃子詞 ("meaningless words in a song for the rhythm"), and magical objects such as weapons, branches of the sacred tree, folding fans, etc. are used. Parasols and scaffolds, regarded as the temporary abode of the spirits, become the central symbols of the dance. Magical actions, formulas, and objects are thus the characteristic elements of the

nenbutsu performing arts, and these three elements have played a role in the origin and further development of the *nenbutsu* dances.

The *odori nenbutsu* became more artistic by using fancy dresses and other adornments. They gradually lost their religious character and changed into *kabuki* acting, an object of pure appreciation. As folk performance arts, however, they developed into recreational Bon dancing while still preserving some religious elements. In this way, the *nenbutsu* observances underwent many changes and have since the Middle Ages given rise to various forms of the performing arts still preserved all over Japan (see Gorai 1967, pp. 114–122). One of those forms is the observance of pacifying the *shōrō* 精霊 (“spirits”) at the Bon festival by the performance of the *odori nenbutsu*.

Another element we have to consider in this context is that of fire, which has been regarded as a means for purification and a protection against calamities, exorcizing the demonic influences that harm people’s lives. Besides pacifying the souls of people who have died a tragic death, fire also had the meaning of welcoming the spirits and sending them off again, but in later years it also came to be used as a means for divining a good or bad crop by observing the way the *hashiramatsu* pole burned and the direction it fell down. More than in its original meaning, the rural population has been interested in the fire’s function of driving evil spirits away and in praying for an abundant harvest and the prosperity and happiness of the family.

The *shinmō kuyō* 新亡供養 (“memorial services for recently deceased”) as a village observance

The *dainenbutsu* and *hashiramatsu* rituals at the cemetery on the evening of 15 August in the five Kamo villages are said to have been started in the Tenshō era (1573–1591) for consoling the spirit of Kuki Sumitaka who had died an unnatural death through his uncle Yoshitaka, founder of the Toba feudal clan. The people of the five villages came together on the hill where there are the graves of the Kuki family and of their own ancestors. The rituals were conducted there in grand style. However, as time went on, quarrels and disputes among the younger people became increasingly frequent, and since 1871 the common celebration was substituted by celebrations in the five individual villages. At present the traditional form is only observed in two of the villages, namely Kōchi-chō and Matsuo-chō, while in the others it is abbreviated or has been discontinued. In 1987, both rituals were designated as “intangible cultural properties.”

The two rituals are sponsored by an organization called *jige* 地下, which is a village group that traces its history back to the age of the feudal clans.

It existed in each of the five places but nowadays only in the two where one can still observe the traditional custom. The organization used to be in charge of the village's political, economical, and religious affairs, but because of joint ownership of the mountains it was separated from the *chō-naikai* 町内会 ("village association") which were set up in modern times, and renamed as the "agricultural cooperative association." (In the present paper I will use the old name *jige*.) The *jige* is made up of the people from the families which have had traditional rights on jointly owning the mountains, so that families which do not enjoy those rights, or immigrants, cannot become members. The *jige* organization consists of three groups, the older generation, the middle aged, and the young. According to age, rituals of initiation and of withdrawal are repeated, and the older ones possess absolute power as being of the highest rank.

The ranking according to age especially appears at the time of the Bon festival since the young are the main actors then. In order of age the young people are in charge of the bells and the drums, and the oldest of the group functions as the head, responsible for the group's performances. The middle aged do not have any specific function, but they help in the preparations and the running, while the older ones bear the ultimate responsibility for the whole festival.

In the morning of 15 August, all the young gather at the cemetery hill where together they construct the *hashiramatsu* scaffold. In the evening they don white short coats and trousers. The head of the youth group, however, and the middle aged and the older ones, put on *ahaori* coat and *hakama* formal skirt. They all gather in front of the Kannon-dō hall which is the place of departure. Before the youth group stand the relatives of the recently deceased, for whom it is the first Bon festival since the death of their family members. They have finished one week of memorial services at the temple and carry a kind of parasol (*kasa* 傘) decorated with faceted Bon lanterns, called *kiriko-dōrō* 切子燈籠 on which the posthumous names of the *shinmō* (recently deceased) are written (see Illustration I). The procession proceeds from there to the cemetery hill with those carrying the *kasa* taking the lead. A circle is formed and the drums are beaten at the sites where Kannon and Jizō are venerated. Once underway, those in charge of bells and drums sometimes violently clash with each other so that invariably people get hurt. Having arrived at the cemetery, first drum beating is offered in front of the Rokujizō and the *hashiramatsu*. This is then repeated in front of the tomb of the Kuki family, where the offering is done for each of the *shinmō* with the *kiriko-dōrō* in the center, and finally before the graves of those who have distinguished themselves in the *jige* organization and in

kiriko dōrō no kasa (lantern-parasol)

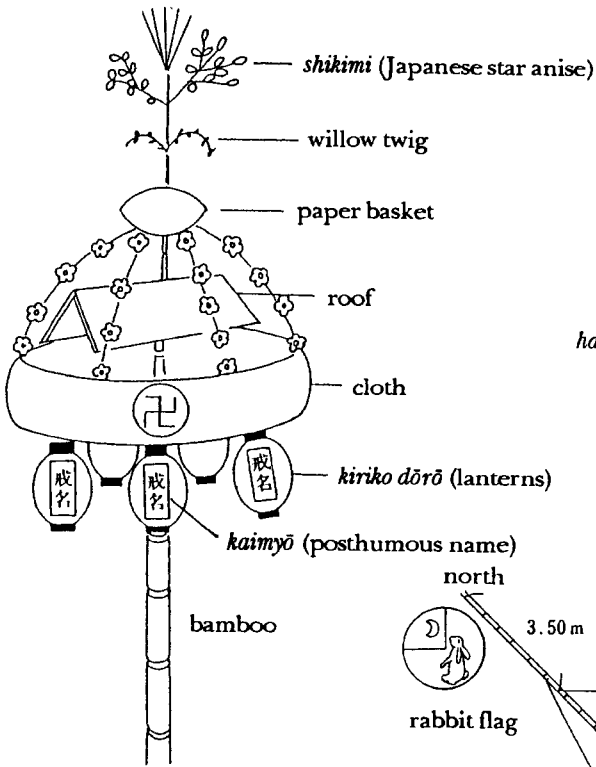


Illustration I

hashiramatsu

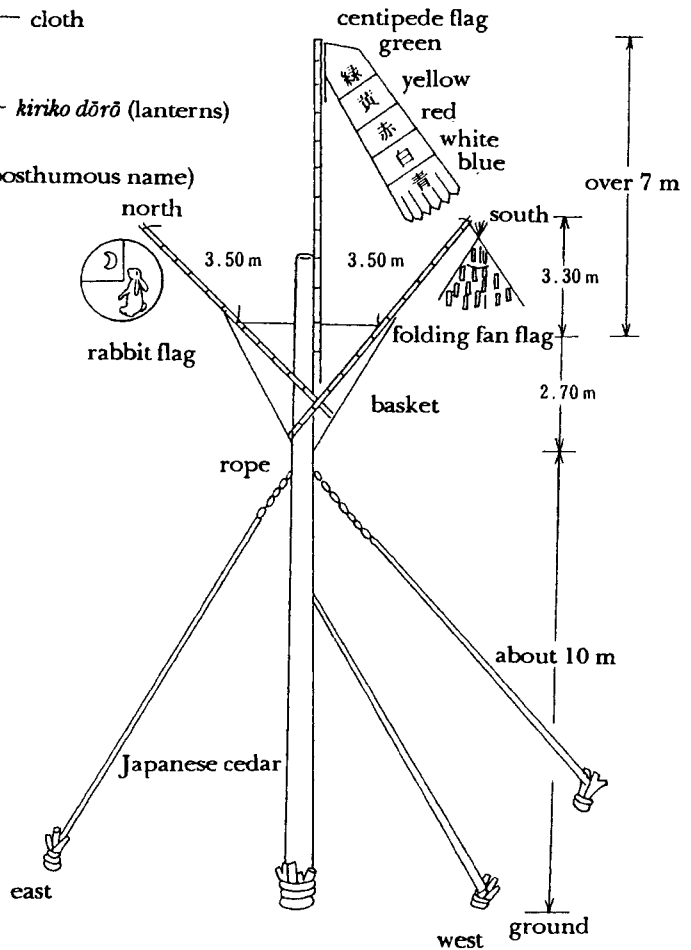


Illustration II

front of the *hashiramatsu*. Once this is done, the *jige* members sit down before the graves of their respective families and take a meal.

After this pause, the younger people, covering themselves with a handkerchief, gather around the *hashiramatsu* (see Illustration II). The lanterns are taken down and lit. This fire is then transmitted to straw bundles, from there to torches, which under the cheering of the *jige* members are thrown into the basket on the *hashiramatsu*. In case the *hashiramatsu* does not burn, one calls it *hotarubi*, and one puts fire to the bottom of the basket with burning straw bundles attached to bamboo poles. This is allegedly done to burn the *gaki* or hungry spirits. If the basket gets on fire, naturally the three flags attached to it come down. But they are immediately cut off so that they are not destroyed by the fire. Watching the fire, the *hashiramatsu* is pulled down in the direction of the west on orders of the head of the youth group. If by chance the scaffold falls down in the direction of the north, it is said that disasters will occur. When the fire is burnt down, the procession descends back to the Kannon-dō and ends with the beating of the drums. The time the whole ritual takes differs from year to year according to the number of recently deceased, but it usually lasts until about four o'clock in the morning of the next day.

In this way, the members of the *jige* come together and perform the ritual of soothing the spirits of the recently deceased. It is an observance which, rather than pure entertainment, displays some very stern traits. One might infer from this that those Bon observances are only held for commemorating the *shinmō*. However, a spirit altar (*shōrōdana* 精霊棚) is set up inside the main hall of the temple with the memorial tablets of the ancestors of the *jige*, of those who died an unnatural death, and others, and outside the main hall another altar is established for all the hungry spirits (*segakidana* 施餓鬼棚). While a spirit altar is erected for the *shinmō* in the houses of people who celebrate the first Bon, so that naturally emphasis is laid upon that aspect, the ancestors are also venerated at the *butsudan* on that occasion. This proves that, while certainly services for the recently deceased constitute the core of the Bon observances, the souls of ancestors, hungry spirits, and people who died an unnatural death are also remembered.

The Nature of the Souls of the Recently Deceased

As just mentioned, in the houses where one celebrates the *hatsubon* 初盆, i.e. the first Bon after the death of a family member, a *shōrōdana* made of board is set up in a room close to the entrance door, apart from the traditional *butsudan* for the ancestors. This resembles in some ways the erection

of the *segakidana* for the hungry spirits outside the main hall of the temple, apart from the *shōrōdana* inside where the *muenbotoke* (“souls of persons who died leaving no relatives behind”) are venerated. This is because the spirits of the *shinmō* are thought not to have yet joined the ranks of the ancestors and therefore as having the same nature as hungry spirits. Those unruly spirits are still able to cause social problems such as epidemics, flood disasters, insect pests, and other kinds of calamities. Therefore, the *jige* members have to perform those rites together in order to pacify the souls of the dead who can cause them harm.

The soothing and sending off of the spirits

During the *dainenbutsu* and *hashiramatsu* rituals, the following magical rites are enacted in order to pacify the *shinmō* and other unruly spirits.

First, the *kasa*, to which the lanterns are attached and which is one of the core symbols of the ritual, is burnt at the end of the festival, so that the spirits are driven away by the fire. This fire is transferred from the straw bundles to torches which then are thrown into the basket on the *hashiramatsu*. This signifies that the spirits of the *shinmō*, who are thought to reside in the lanterns, are moved to the torches and from there sent into the basket. Finally, those and other hungry spirits who have gathered around the three flags attached to the *hashiramatsu* are driven away by the fire.

Second, the sending off of the spirits takes the form of placing the *kasa* in front of the Kannon-dō, then in front of the Jizō statues, or in former times in places where the dead bodies of aborted children and animals were thrown away and thus regarded as taboo, so as to invite the spirits to assemble there, and by folding the *kasa* then to contain them. Also, just like the boards of the *sekigakidana* enclose the memorial tablets representing all the spirits, the graves of the recently deceased are covered with a canvas indicating that the unruly spirits are in this way contained.

Third, until 1930 the bereaved families of the *shinmō* carried a *kasa* with lanterns for each dead. During the procession they clashed with each other, so that it happened that the *kasa* burnt down before arriving at the graves. This was interpreted as a powerful means for driving the spirits away. Also, the younger people with their youthful strength are thought to possess extraordinary spiritual powers for opposing the spirits, so that when it happens that at several places the youths, carrying bells and drums, clash with each other, this is also interpreted as helping the expulsion of the spirits.

Fourth, by shouting *nā nā* (Buddhist invocation *namu namu*) or *odore odore* (“dance, dance”), the spirits are calmed down and made to dance on

the rhythm of the bells and the drums. The image of the youths violently beating the drums can rightly be called the image of dancing spirits. In this chaos of people or spirits, the hearts of the *shinmō* calm down before the day dawns, and by repeating the magic words *nā nā* and *yukare yukare* (“go away, go away”) the spirits are made to leave. In this way magic objects, actions, and words all combine to pacify and send the spirits off. Beneath this one can detect the idea that like the hungry spirits, the spirits of the recently deceased are also full of impurities, prone to inflict harm, and dangerous if set loose.

Expectations from the unruly spirits

There is another characteristic of *shinmō* which deserves attention. For example, the spirits are welcomed in the *shōrōdana* and offered the first ears of rice in the houses where the first Bon after death is celebrated. Called *hatsubon kuyō* (“memorial services for the first Bon”) by the *jige* members, vermicelli and sugar might be sent, so that here some characteristics of the festival of the *ta no kami* (“gods of the rice fields”) can be discerned. Also when at the *dainenbutsu* and *hashiramatsu* observances the young men run around shouting *ōdenya* (“peaceful rice fields”), and, in former times, divined the crops by watching in what direction the *hashiramatsu* would fall down, this is indeed interpreted as driving away the spirits prone to inflict harm. On the other hand, there are elements in this which indicate a kind of reliance upon the strong spiritual powers of the spirits. Furthermore, special attention is given to the spirit of Kuki Sumitaka, who died an unnatural death, and to those members of the *jige* who were persons of distinguished contributions. Their power to inflict harm is certainly acknowledged. But if they are properly venerated they become spirits with a strong personality bringing good luck. By welcoming them in the period of tension before the autumn harvest, offering them rare gifts, and venerating them by offering them the customary three meals per day, people seem also to expect to receive something from them. Since after the memorial services are finished they tell them “come again, come again” and send them off to the river, not only fear but also a religious feeling of expecting their return remains in their hearts.

Because emphasis is laid only upon the fearful aspect of the *shinmō*, one easily thinks that those spirits are dreadful spirits. However, once pacified and settled in the other world they surely become guardian *kami* of their descendants. In this way, the spirits who receive memorial services at the Bon festival become peaceful guardian *kami*, and we can discern here the expectations people foster for their return visit to the *jige*.

Bon Observances as Initiation Rites

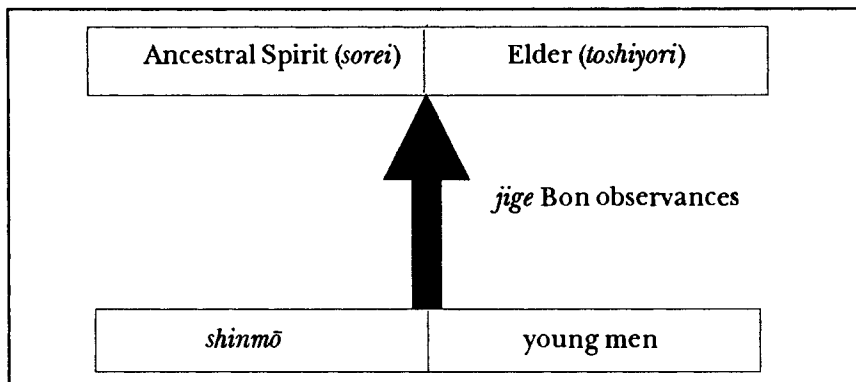
Why has this form of memorial services for soothing the souls of the recently deceased and turning them into benevolent spirits arisen? In order to solve this problem we need to make clear what the people of the *jige* think about the process whereby a dead spirit gradually rises in rank.

For example, in the *hatsubon* families a special altar, the *shōrōdana*, is set up for the *shinmō* apart from the *butsudan* where the ancestors are venerated. If we consider the fact that from the next year on this *shinmō* spirit is venerated just like the ancestors, we clearly see here the process of a *shinmō* becoming a *sorei* or ancestral spirit. If the *shinmō* is then a candidate for becoming *sorei*, it must have the qualifications to become so, and since it is still an unruly spirit it is a being which still needs some "exercise." However, the spirits of the *shinmō* who were not members of the *jige* cannot receive these memorial services and thus cannot become the ancestral spirits of the *jige*. In other words, the purpose of the rituals is to turn only the spirits of former members of the *jige* into ancestral spirits, and this is the way the *jige* members venerate their common ancestors.

The rituals whereby the *shinmō* become *sorei*, in other words the initiation rites, are performed by the young men who became *jige* members. The young men who have just joined the *jige* have still to learn the rules of the organization, so that in this respect they resemble the *shinmō* who are to enter the world of the ancestral spirits. In order to go beyond their former selves as children, they masquerade by painting their faces, putting on personal ornaments and colorful loin ribbons from the other sex, and the like. The young men, who in this way have become beings in a liminal stage, carry the *kasa* with the lanterns attached symbolizing the spirits of the *shinmō*, and through their actions they express the wildness of those spirits. The heads of the youth groups make the new members undergo several rigorous trials. This is to teach them the rules of the *jige*, but it can also be taken as having the meaning of teaching the spirits of the *shinmō* the rules of the world of ancestral spirits. Since both the young men and the young spirits are not yet acquainted with the rules of the group they enter, these trials are a prerequisite, or an initiation ceremony.

This kind of initiation ceremony is also repeated afterwards, since after having entered the young group, similar ceremonies of entering (and withdrawing from) the group are also held for the groups of the middle aged and the older generation. In this way the oldest member of the old age group becomes the highest in rank. Similarly the spirits of the recently deceased who have become members of the group of ancestral spirits be-

come gradually more purified and more fully ancestral spirits by means of repeated memorial services. Therefore, we can say that the role division according to age in the *dainenbutsu* and *hashiramatsu* rituals expresses in an extremely concrete way the symbolized world of the ancestral spirits (see box). This world and the other world are thus linked together under similar conditions, and this is how the ancestral spirits fulfill their role of being the ancestral spirits of the *jige*.



Conclusion

The concrete cases discussed here are not necessarily representative of memorial services held all over Japan. However, even in the big cities, where customs of rural village areas are thought to have completely disappeared, it is a general Japanese trend to give special attention to the recently deceased spirits at the time of the Bon festival. The purpose of my research was to answer the question why this is the case. Of course, there are other approaches possible than an interpretation of the *shinmō* based upon the observances in the Shima region. However, I think it is possible to determine the special place of the *shinmō* in the Bon observances by trying to understand it in terms of the two aspects of pacifying and sending off the spirits on the one hand, and of initiation on the other hand. There is no doubt a great significance in the fact that, in the case of Shima, these two aspects continue to be clearly manifested in relation to the traditional *jige* group.

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