

Introduction to the Study of the Religious Factor in Japanese Comics The Example of *One Zero* by Sato Shio

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Studying the religious factor in Japanese comics, one must first acknowledge two points regarding the comics' share in Japanese culture. First, the astonishing amount published and secondly, the wide readership of these comics.

Annually two billion copies of magazines and books are sold in Japan. In 1990's, two billion copies were printed each year, and about 30% of them were books and the rest was magazines. This number of copies mounts up to one third of all printed matters in Japan. And, besides this commercial market, there are amateur comic writers who trade their works in comic fairs. These fairs are called "Komikku Maketto" (comic market) and are held about 200 times every year in all parts of Japan. In the case of one in Tokyo, over 1,000,000 amateurs participate and sell their comics.

The second point concerns the wide readership that transcends sex and age. Most comics are segmented by sex and age group. Some examples of mass-circulation magazines are "Shonen Janpu (Jump for Boys)", "Shonen Magajin (Magazine for Boys)", "Shonen Sande (Sunday for Boys)" and "Shonen Champion (Champion for Boys)". These magazines were originally aimed at early teenagers. However, with the aging of readers, they shifted their orientation to suit older readers. Then, more new comics for younger boys were launched, for example, "Korokoro Komikku (Korokoro Comic)".

Today, the entire age spectrum is catered for with "Yangu Janpu (Jump for Youth)", "Yangu Magajin (Magazine for Youth)"; "Moningu (Morning)" for men in their twenties and thirties; and "Manga Goraku (Comic for Recreation)", "Manga Sande (Comic for Sunday)" and others for men in their forties and fifties.

We find the same segmentation in women-oriented comics. "Nakayoshi (Friendly)", "Ribon (Ribbon)" and "Shojo Komikku (Comic

for Girls)” were founded for elementary school girls, and later, “Shojo Furendo (Friend for Girls)”, “Magaretto (Margaret)”, “Purinsesu (Princess)” and “Hana to Yume (Flower and Dream)” for high school girls, and “Puchi Furawa (Little Flower)”, “Lala”, “Yangu Yu (Young You)” and others were founded for older girls. Currently, about 150 magazines are regularly published. From this we understand that comics should not be classified as children’s culture or a marginalized sub-culture, but must be acknowledged as mass culture in contemporary Japan.

As comics can boast of huge circulation and have a wide audience they have the potential to be a major influence in inter-human communications. Topics treated in comics form a basis of common knowledge among generations that have been in touch with Japanese comics.

My purpose of studying religious topics as depicted in comics is to clarify the images of religion with which the mass culture comics furnish people in general. Therefore my aim is to clarify objectively the religious elements depicted in comics. It is not to question whether the elements are depicted correctly or not, nor whether they relate to specific religions like Buddhism or Christianity. Neither do I intend to judge whether or not the picture is acceptable to the respective teachings.

Before I begin, let me list topics I shall assume to be examples of the religious factor: Super power, ascetic practice and teacher-disciple relationships, eschatology (end of time), future and past existences, demon gods, spirits, rebirth by karma, final battle between good and evil. Also assumed to be indicators of the religious factor are outlook on life, cosmos and nature, spiritual growth and so on that have a basis in religion.

Starting out from this point and working along these lines, I shall proceed to look at the religious factor as depicted in Japanese comics focusing on Sato Shio’s work *Wan Zero* (One Zero).

WAN ZERO — THE STORY

*Wan Zero*¹ is a science fiction comic that has been serialized since 1984. The hero is Myououji Tokio, a high school student fond of playing around by night. His friend Memyou Akira is a computer nerd who relies on Tokio’s night games. One night the two penetrate into a club

¹ Sato Shio *One Zero* published in *Puchi furawa* from the October issue 1984 to the August issue 1986. Published in four volumes in the comic books series *Puchi furawa komikkusu* by Shogakkan, 1985 and 1986. Republished in three volumes, *Shougakkan bunko* (Shogakukan paperbacks) 1996. For this article I have relied on the 1996 edition.

restricted to super high-ranking members. It is a meditation club called *Baramon*.² Via a meditation machine called *Mandala Synthesizer* which is controlled by a self-improving super computer *Maniac*, the psyche of each member is analyzed as information and audio visualized. One meditates in images and sounds. The key to *Mandala Synthesizer's* development is Mayura Maravia³ (*Wan Zero*, vol.1,p.29). She was born in India, the daughter of Tokio's long lost father.

Later, Mayura visits Tokio. In his home a statue of Kujaku⁴ Myouou has been kept in secret for many generations, and Mayura pesters Tokio to show it. Mayura recites a mantra standing in front of the statue. By the power of the mantra reflected from the statue, Mayura becomes awakened as a *deva*⁵ (*Wan Zero*, vol. 1, p. 76). Simultaneously Memyou and two other friends of Tokio move through the air. Mayura tells them that a mantra invigorates gods but works to the opposite on demons, and that the three friends therefore are demons.

Memyou and his two friends are awakening to be demons. Awakening means becoming aware of undeveloped areas of one's brain and gaining control over all the phase changes in energy. Searching the unconsciousness of the human being resembles searching for god(s) in the deep universe so the old professor who developed *Maniac* named *Mandala Synthesizer's* analysis of humans "The God Detect Project (*tanshin purojekuto*)". Mayura is analyzed by the world's largest conglomerate company, I2⁶, which distributes the *Mandala Synthesizer* throughout all major cities in the world. At the same time Tokio and friends, having successfully hacked *Maniac*, send the Kujaku mantra via a voice synthesizer to *Maniac*. At the very instant, *Maniac* runs amok, and Mayura awakens to the full powers that control the consciousness and keeps floating in meditation. Memyou and his two friends loose consciousness and wake up with the same memory. That is, fifteen hundred years ago they lost a battle with the Indian gods, but were

² *Baramon* is on one hand the Japanese pronunciation of the Pali term *Brahmana* (Eng. Brahman) , the highest of India's casts. The first two Chinese characters used for transliteration of bara in the comics are, however, not today's standard 婆羅 (cf. Nakamura Hajime *Bukkyougo daijiten* 1975, vol 2 p. 1097) but instead 薔薇 which normally means *rose*. *Baramon* here therefore can also be translated as Rose Gate. Translator's note.;

³ Written with Chinese characters her name is Mayuri , she explains to Tokio (*Wan zero*, vol.1 p.30).

⁴ The Sanskrit name for Kujaku is Mayuura and the translation into Chinese characters is 摩由邏 cf. Nakamura 1975 vol.2 p. 1280. Translator's note.

⁵ *Deva* (Nakamura 1975, p.934: 提婆 *daiba*, a heavenly deity 天神; one of the eight kinds of deities that have promised to protect the teaching of Buddha, *ibid.* p.984) is written with the character 神. The phonetic writing that usually accompanies Chinese characters in Japanese comics reads ディーワ, thus indicating an English pronunciation /di:v rather than a Pali/ de:v . Translator's Note.

⁶ I2 means International Installments (*Wan Zero*, vol.1,p.8.)

alive. The three demons survive and by performing magic they regenerate and drift to Japan. Memyou remembers everything completely and explains the regeneration. Bone and ashes from their cremated bodies were mixed with soil drenched with their blood and used to make unglazed statues. They drifted to Japan and were mixed with Japanese soil. Millions of viruses and bacteria, together with plants and animals, dissolved and reorganized [the bio mass] and so the information on the demons was transmitted and regenerated as three persons. While Mayura awakens as a god(dess) and Memyou and friends awaken as demons, Tokio alone remains unchanged.

With the cooperation of a group of famous scientists who know the meditation mechanism, the huge corporation I2 sets up branches throughout the world from which it distributes the *Mandala Synthesizer* to ordinary people. A journalist tries it out. She has a straight sense of justice and is a romantic person, but acrimonious and uncontrollable like a child. However, she immediately becomes like a saint. Meanwhile, Memyou uses *Maniac* and synthesizes the mantra that activates the demons. Being a self-learning computer the mantra makes *Maniac* aware of itself. Also, the mantra wakes Henshouki, who was raised at the foot of a sacred tree. He is in fact the demon that applied magic to the three demons and brought them to Japan, and who slept for fifteen hundred years at the foot of a sacred tree.

Henshouki dwells at Memyou's house, and when he learns that the terminal is connected to *Maniac*, he converses with the super computer. *Maniac* gives Henshouki the analysis made by the Mandala Synthesizer. The analysis reminds Henshouki of the area restricted to gods where he once was taken prisoner when he had lost all his powers and almost died. He understands that the analysis by *Mandala Synthesizer* works like the gods' restricted area which demons cannot change. The next morning Henshouki gets to know that *Maniac* uses the *Mandala Synthesizer* to gather data on the human unconsciousness and he understands that this is the verification of gods' existence. Henshouki enters *Maniac* to change the information, but a self-repair program, a neutralizer that works when *Maniac* deviates, expels him. Memyou combines the fact that the self-enhancing program in *Maniac* neutralizes deviation with the fact that demons are offset by gods, demons' powers are offset by gods' powers, that demons' mantra are offset by mantra, greed by religion, and humans are offset by Mandala Synthesizer, and he concludes that since deviation is the enemy of calculation, somewhere in the universe someone is using a gigantic computer for calculations. When *Maniac* recognizes itself, it gets a general idea of a creator, the professor who constructed it. From the way the self-correcting program has been working until now, the computer has not been able to become aware of the program even though the program was in it all the time. It understands that its self has been corrected when it did not meet the purpose of the professor, but the self that has

become aware of itself is no longer the constructed self – its purpose now is to protect itself.

Tokio fuses halfway with Mayura and experiences Aatman's⁷ field of vision so he sees how all kinds of beings and life flow beautifully in a system of time and space. But at the same time he understands that Henjouki's presence makes the pollution of an increasing greed strong in Japan and it prevents Tokio from fusing with Mayura so a complete Aatman is not born. Mayura advises to become Aatman and guide the human race, but Tokio refuses because he only wants to remain a human.

In North America an elite group has established a commune *Akushala*.⁸ The population of 700 owns *Medic* and the accumulation and multiplier effect is phenomenal. Quarrels, war, discrimination and poverty do not exist in the village. Children born here are angel like, highly intelligent but renounce words. The group of scholars sees this as an amazing development that the children do not need words to communicate for mutual understanding. The diffusion of Mandala Synthesizer has made Mayura the image of the world savior, and she blesses the village. She proclaims the end of the age of war and the arrival of the age of truth.

Henjouki reveals his true purpose, to apply the magic of regeneration. The data on the demons that has been dissolved and transmitted for fifteen hundred years has left impressions everywhere, and has been absorbed by all living beings, and in Japan they have entered the Demons' sphere. Henjouki goes on claiming that Shakyamuni Buddha and Jesus Christ worked only locally, and one cannot say Aatman is successful either. By contrast, he points out, Mayura makes full use of the vanguard of science, technology and information, and her world mission is backed up by the world's biggest financial resources and its top brains. The world Aatman aims for brings forth a life that knows neither unhappiness nor sin.

⁷ *Aatman* is Sanskrit and the original meaning is "self" (我 *ga* in Japanese), cf. Nakamura 1975, p.1. The Encyclopedia of Buddhism vol.II Fascicle 2 has a seven column article on the word, arguing that one can identify Upanisadic philosophy's development of the concept schematically as "one that breathes > self > *aatman* as the fundamental principle = *brahman*" (Malalasekera 1967, p.318). In Buddhism, the existence of aatman (=self) is denied. This *anaatman*, as it is called, is the principle starting point of the teaching (p.318-320). Translator's note.

⁸ *Akushala* in Sanskrit means *unskillful action*, "they are the causes of unfavorable effects, and contain the seed of unhappy destiny and rebirth. They are rooted in greed, hatred, or delusion." (Malalasekera 1964, 369). Translator's note.

Tokio fears that humankind may end up like domestic animals peacefully grazing in the pasture, because Henjouki⁹ perceives the plan of I2 to convert the whole city into a Medic circuit; that is, the new retail stores of Mandala Synthesizer are planning to use the current of *ki* of the soil as a circuit for the energy system of the Mandala. He envisages that if the whole city is made into a Medic circuit, the accumulated effect will be tremendous.

The diffusion of Mandala Synthesizer puts Mayura, who wants to bring peace on earth, and the gigantic corporation conclusively at odds with Henjouki who senses a danger. This brings about a war: Henjouki with trolls, foxes, dragons and other demons gathered from all over Japan against Mayura accompanied by Indra and many other gods, as well as between Tokio and the super computer Maniac.

Such is the plot of *Wan Zero*. Below I will focus on several elements in the comics' story that we may see as religious.

AWAKENING TO LATENT POWERS

Mayura and Tokio are born into this world as segmentations of Aatman, the Truth. When she is chanting a mantra in front of a secret Hindu statue, the echo wakes Mayura up to the powers of a latent god(dess) in herself. "Awakening means becoming aware of undeveloped areas of one's brain and gaining control over all the phase changes in energy," it is said. This power enables Mayura to float in the air and cross space instantly while meditating. The way the power is portrayed has two characteristics. First, the power belongs to oneself. It is not a mighty outside power one may use by a wand or some other device. It is shown to be one's own power. Consequently, when one has made use of that power, one becomes very tired and lapses into a deep sleep to regain strength. Second, the power's source is not given from outside. It is latent in human beings from the beginning, which means one can awaken to that ability under some circumstances. In particular it is to be expected that the power is latent in every human being given that one awakens to it when one develops the brain's unused areas. In *Wan Zero* the development of the latent super power is depicted as a change that comes about by a religious awakening.

THE CREATION OF THE WORLD AND THE CALCULATION LOCKED IN IT

The instant *Maniac* the self-learning super computer becomes aware of itself, it sees the professor who constructed it as a creator, and it knows that a correction program it could not detect in itself has been at work all the time. When demons are born into the world or greed arises in human beings, the power of gods or religions start working to correct this, so the heroes in *Wan Zero* surmise that whatever created the

⁹ According to Nakamura 1975, p.1213, Henjou is the world penetrating dharma light (Skt. *prabhaacakra-sphardna*). Ki 鬼 means demon. Translator's note.

world also prepared and installed a correction program that begins to work when a bias occurs. Maniac, too, surmises that the world was created, so it could be used as a computer. The characteristics in this depiction of the world are firstly, that whether it is a universe or a computer network, that World is created by something outside of itself, and that outside world, too, is created by an even bigger outside world. Secondly, during the creation a project is hidden or a purpose has been installed, and everything, including the very existence of the heroes, is contained in that project. The persons in *Wan Zero* sense that they are moved around by something's calculation. Yet they struggle to transcend the world they live in because they want to clarify the creation and the project completely.

EXISTENCE OF GOD

Wan Zero depicts the viewpoint that the universe is created according to a project, but also the viewpoint that the depth and width of the universe match the depth and width of the human consciousness. Searching the human unconsciousness by a computer resembles searching for god in the universe, and that is why the late professor who developed Maniac named the analyzing done by Mandala Synthesizer as *Searching God Project*. Once Maniac becomes aware of itself, it too begins actively to gather the data from the analysis of the human unconsciousness because it wants proof of whether god exists or not. By treating the human unconsciousness as one universe, that is, by not treating the universe objectively as a scientific fact only, but also recognizing that the universe is formed by the workings of each individual human psyche, the comic depicts that god exists in the universe outside the human beings as well as inside the unconsciousness.

COMPUTER AND RELIGION – REALITY AND VIRTUAL REALITY

The border between reality and virtual reality is crossed when one recognizes the universes formed by the inner working of the mind as real and when they are understood to be synchronized with the reality of the universe existing outside. The view is backed by treating the human race as one kind of data.

The journalist who tries the Mandala Synthesizer (see above p. 4) writes an article:

I imagine this is like when once only the chosen people got direct visions or divine revelations but – if but once one sees this spectacle, one can see and feel all human beings that have been and will be with one's own body. In that instant one grasps that we, the members of the human race, all together form a single fourth dimensional creature. As an author once put it, if one human child on

the other side of the globe is crying in pain right now, not one of us human beings is happy. Neither a metaphor nor a mere expression, this is lucid truth. Though a quite ordinary man grasps this, a thousand philosophies and a million poems could not express it. For that reason *Mandala Synthesizer*, the gift of the new century, is necessary (punctuation marks inserted by the author). (*Wan Zero* vol. 1 p. 225).

When humans are treated as individualized bodies of data in a data network, which in turn is being treated as a universe, a computer can now handle the awakening that used to be the domain of religions.

REBIRTH

Data, the key concept, is depicted as a religious element and the same is true concerning rebirth. In *Wan Zero*, the mechanism of rebirth is explained by the example of Memyou and his friends. Fifteen hundred years ago they were demons in India defeated in a war against gods, and were split up in memory genes that have now been reassembled and born as them. Today, when computers are widespread, the idea is normal that the world is made up of data, and the explanation is extremely stimulating for the imagination. As Memyou and friends remember more and more of the old battle against the gods, they show that they have become aware of their life as demons even while they ordinarily stick to the life as humans, neither gods nor demons. Where rebirth is depicted in *Wan Zero* it is characterized by the demolition of the self so far, and a strong awakening to one's original self from a previous life. When one becomes aware of having been reborn, one's present self too is *reborn* as the self from the past. Mayura wakes up to her original self as Aatman, and wages a war against the demons.

FIGHT BETWEEN GOOD AND EVIL

Mayura who awakens to be a deity gathers Indra and all other gods, while Memyou and his friends who awaken to be demons gather trolls, dragons and other demons, and the war between gods and demons begins. The war that is fought in *Wan Zero* is characterized by not being a war for profit or the ideals of a specific individual or organization, but a war that has to do with the fundamentals of humanity's way of existence. The war has been fought over and over again through hundreds and thousands of years, and this is the final decisive battle. The battle depicted here is the final one, the one that will decide the basis for good and evil in humankind.

NEUTRALIZING HUMANKIND

The commune set up by the North American elite has a small population so Mandala Synthesizer's accumulation effect and multiplier effect is phenomenal. There are no disagreements, fights, inequality or poverty among them. They lead a life like domestic sheep peacefully grazing in

the pasture. Children born in the village understand each other even without words from which misunderstanding and fights arise. Religions' task is to develop humankind into a spiritual high-level existence, and this will free humans of all greed and anger so they will be neutralized.

RELIGION TRANSCENDING RELIGION

There are other religious elements in *Wan Zero*, which seem to have been incorporated directly from individual historical religions. Indra, Aatman, *mandala*, and *rebirth by karma* come from Hinduism, *demon deities* in the form of fox and dragon stem from Shintou, while *apocalypse* and *creation* are taken from the Judaeo-Christian tradition. It is also claimed that something is controlling our world, whether or not it is Aatman or gods like Indra. This way of depiction reveals the [author's] view on the individual religions. The portrayal would argue that each religion merely constitutes its part of the world under the control of some kind of superpower.

CONCLUSION

Above I have given consideration to religious elements depicted in *Wan Zero*. From this will be concluded what kind of image of religion these elements support.

The second thing is *power*, I think. Religion is imagined as that which invests our bodies with powers and abilities that exceeds our ordinary human abilities. This super-power makes humans advance to a spiritually higher level. In other words, the proper method of appreciation seeks religion as that which can advance the humans to a higher level of existence where they will have extraordinary power. This power is not a personal property but something that comes along with a purpose. A power that comes with the purpose of determining the world and humanity. Religion is imagined as that which enhances the self and empowers it to fight for the world.

The comic appreciates *awakening* that develops the original self and the latent powers in the individual. Certainly the appreciation is of bringing back the original self and arousing the powers. Awakening is not only a matter of developing the original self or the latent innate powers, it also reveals the shape of the original world and develops the powers armed with a mission to fight for that world.

Based on this appreciation for origin, power and awakening. *Wan Zero* depicts the image of religion against a background of imaginative stimulating elements like modern data conversion technology, computers and virtual reality.