

Spirit Possession as Depicted in Painting Scrolls

Tokunaga Seiko

Abstract

This paper will examine the images of spirit mediums painted on the famous 14th century *emakimono* (painting scroll) known as *Kasuga Gongen genkie*.

Emakimono is an illustrated narrative form created in Japan mainly during the 11th to 16th century. *Emakimono* are composed of both text and pictures. They may depict romances, battles as well as legends of temples and shrines. *Kasuga Gongen genkie* is a collection of legends concerning the Kasuga deity, written and painted in the year 1309. The production of *Genkie* was commissioned by Saionji Kinhiro, a powerful court noble; he then dedicated *Genkie* to the Kasuga shrine.

There are 20 scenes which depict possessed mediums in *Genkie*. Both men and women are spirit mediums who convey the oracles, and their occupations are various. Most of them seem entirely normal, but nearly half are painted with fingers pointing. However, mediums in real life often manifested unusual behavior, but finger pointing is hardly an unusual action.

It is probable that the painter of *Genkie* chose these mannerisms as suitable for mediums whose task it was to convey oracles. The painter emphasizes the sacred quality of the mediums, and he avoids painting their actual unusual actions. I argue that these depictions are typical of mediums possessed by deities in medieval Japan.

Key Words; spirit possession, spirit medium, oracle, *emakimono*, *Kasuga Gongen genkie*

Introduction

Spirit possession is the seizure of a human being by an external spirit whether it be a deity, demon, human, animal or something other. Every major cultural tradition has espoused the idea of spirit possession. In Indonesia, *Kesurupan* is a well known phenomenon of spirit possession. Spirit possession is also the core of *Sang Hyang Dedari*, a world famous ritual dance in Bali.

The phenomenon is well known in Japan, too. The words *kamigakari* 神かゝり (possessed by kami 神, or deity) and *kitsunetsuki* 狐憑き (possessed by *kitsune* 狐, or a fox) are a part of daily life. Spirit mediums that enter into a trance have historically often been represented in many different artistic forms: paintings, novels, plays, movies and manga. How mediums are represented is indicative of prevalent ideas both about spirit possession, and about supernatural phenomena like kami. This paper discusses the images of spirit mediums painted on *emakimono* 絵巻物 (painting scrolls) in the medieval ages in order to research how the people of that period regarded the phenomenon. The *emakimono* focused on in this paper is *Kasuga Gongen genkie* 春日権現験記絵 (also called *Kasuga Gongen reigenki* 春日権現霊験記),

one of the most famous and outstanding *emakimono*.

Some typical examples of spirit possession in manga provide an introduction to this discussion of *Genkie*. The comparison with today's examples will help to clarify the features of the medieval ages.

Spirit Possession in Manga

Few people have actually seen the phenomenon of spirit possession in today's Japan even though the phenomenon is well known. Scenes of spirit possession often appear in a variety of artistic creations, especially in popular culture: manga, animation and popular novel. This poses an interesting problem. Examples can be found in a popular manga, *Naruto* ナルト.¹ The protagonist, Uzumaki Naruto うずまきナルト is possessed by Kyūbi no yōko 九尾の妖狐 (a nine-tailed demon fox).² The conflict with this demon spirit plays an important dramatic role in the story. Some of the other characters have their own possessing spirits, and phenomena like spirit possession occur often throughout this manga. The examples in other manga are too numerous to count.

Spirit possession is expressed in a variety of ways in manga. This paper shows two typical cases. Figure 1 depicts a scene in which a man enters a trance, possessed by kami. He is jumping, shouting, and his eyes are abnormally wide open. His actions are violent. He seems to be emotionally disturbed. This depiction is based on common ideas about spirit possession. Today's Japanese consider the phenomenon to be a type of madness in general.³ Figure 2 shows a scene in which a boy is possessed by the spirit of an old man. The spirit stands behind the medium, drawn like shadow. The movements of the boy are the same as those of the old man. This expression suggests that the body of the boy is perfectly controlled by the old man's spirit. The same manner of depiction is also used for other invisible spiritual beings, such as ghost and monsters. The type seen in Figure 2 is not found in *emakimono* or other medieval paintings; rather it seems to have appeared during the Edo period (1603–1868).⁴ Depicting spiritual beings as a shadow is not a common feature of medieval paintings.

Emakimono

The tradition of the handscroll came to Japan from China in the 6th or 7th century.⁵ Painted handscrolls, that is *emakimono*, flourished as an art form in Japan during the 11th to 16th centuries. *Emakimono* are made of paper or silk joined horizontally, and composed of text and pictures. They may

¹ *Naruto* ナルト is written and illustrated by Kishimoto Masashi. This manga is being serialized in *Shūkan Shōnen Jump* since 1999 and adapted into anime on TV Tokyo since 2002.

² Kyūbi no yōko (in general, Kyūbi no kitsune 九尾の狐) originated in China, and Korea has the same legend too. Unlike in *Naruto*, this monster transfers a woman in common. For Kyūbi no kitsune in China, see Ninomiya 2006.

³ It is also common that the more mediums act violently the more people believe the possession are real. See Blacker 1986, p. 277.

⁴ Many cases like Figure 2 are found in *kusazōshi* 草双紙 (illustrated literature in Edo period: woodblock printing books).

⁵ For *emakimono*, see Murase 1983, pp. 15–28.



Figure 1. Typical Medium in Manga 1

Source: Mizuki Shigeru. *Shinpika retsuden sono san* 神秘家列伝其ノ参. Kadokawa Shoten 2005.



Figure 2. Typical Medium in Manga 2

Source: Takei Hiroyuki. *Shaman king kanzen ban 2* シャーマンキング完全版 2. Shueisha 2008.

express romances, battles or legends of temples and shrines. One of the oldest *emakimono*, *Chōjū giga* 鳥獣戯画 is often introduced as the first manga. Needless to say, *Chōjū giga* is not a manga in the true sense of the word; more precisely it is the first illustrated humorous story in the history of Japanese literature. The relation between manga and *emakimono* is neither simple nor direct. However, Japanese people have loved illustrated stories from ancient times, just as contemporary Japanese love manga. Manga's prosperity today is based on a long history of familiarity with and fondness for illustrated stories.⁶

Originally, only men and women of high social status could see and read *emakimono*, because making them demanded high costs, and so they were treated as treasures. Today, only a limited number of people, specialists of cultural properties, are able to handle real *emakimono*. However, it is now possible for others to have access to famous *emakimono* in color printed books for the last few decades. Moreover, some *emakimono* images are now open to the public on web sites. For example, e-Museum offers images of Japanese national treasures (国宝) owned by national museums.⁷ On this site, one can access some of the most famous medieval examples of the genre. The International Research Center for Japanese Studies (Nichibunken) also has an online database of *emakimono* collections.⁸ These web sites make it easy for ever larger numbers of people to have access and so to appreciate *emakimono*.

Kasuga Gongen Genkie

Kasuga Gongen genkie is a collection of legends concerning the deities of Kasuga, written and painted in the year 1309 (Engyō 延慶2).⁹ *Genkie* consists of 20 scrolls, which comprise 94 *dan* 段 (a unit used for counting texts and pictures of *emakimono*). The production of *Genkie* was commissioned by Saionji Kinhira 西園寺公衡, a powerful court noble. He was a descendant of the Fujiwar clan whose kami was none other than the Kasuga Gongen. Kasuga deities are enshrined in the Kasuga shrine located in modern day Nara prefecture. Kinhira dedicated *Genkie* to the shrine, to express his gratitude for blessings received and to seek prosperity.

The text is written by three nobles and one monk of the highest court rank. They belong to Fujiwara clan too. The painter is Takashina Takakane 高階隆兼, the head Court Painter. He was one of the most outstanding painters in the Kamakura period (1185–1333). His painting style is traditional and elegant.

Genkie has especially high artistic and historical value. In its artistic aspect, as stated above, it was composed by artists of the highest caliber. From an historical aspect, it is rare for *emakimono* that the year of composition, the commissioner and the reason of production are well known. This is one reason why *Genkie* is now considered as marking the apogee of *emkimono* in Kamakura Japan. *Genkie's* style is authentic and typical, and this is the main reason why my focus here falls on it. Researching how a phenomenon is depicted in *Genkie* will help to yield the essence of typical medieval *emakimono*

⁶ Takahata 1999 explains from the point of view of an anime film maker the relation between *emakimono* and manga, anime.

⁷ e-Museum: <http://www.emuseum.jp/>

⁸ Nichibunken web page: <http://www.nichibun.ac.jp/>

⁹ For *Genkie*, see *Kasuga Gongen genkie* 1982, Tyler 1990, and Kōbe Setsuwa Kenkyūkai 2005.

style. Furthermore, *Genkie* has many scenes of spirit possession; in this it is somewhat exceptional. It is necessary now to start our examination of *Genkie*.

Spirit Mediums in *Genkie*

There are 23 scenes depicting mediums in *Genkie*. The details of the spirit mediums in these scenes are listed up on Table 1.¹⁰ Three of these scenes are not painted.¹¹ In the other 20 scenes, both men and women are serving spirit mediums. Their occupations are various. Professional mediums, *miko* (woman shaman) can be found. At the same time, non-professional beings play the same role in many cases. The possessing spirits are Kasuga deities in almost all cases.

Scroll-dan	Possessed person	Possessing spirit	Action
1-1	woman	Kasuga deity	seated, pointing with a finger
1-4	retired emperor	Kasuga deity	seated
3-1	noble man	Kasuga deity	seated
4-2	little boy	Kasuga deity	standing
4-4	miko(woman shaman) of Kasuga shrine	Kasuga deity	
4-5	miko of Kasuga shrine	Kasuga deity	
6-2	miko	Sannō deity *1	seated, one sleeve slipping off
6-3	miko	Kasuga deity	seated, pointing with a finger
8-5	miko of Atsuta shrine *2	Kasuga deity	standing, pointing with a finger
11-2	monk	Kasuga deity	seated, yawning
13-2	young girl	Kasuga deity	seated, pointing with a finger
13-3	miko of Kasuga shrine	Kasuga deity	
13-6	young boy	Kasuga deity	standing, pointing with a finger
15-2	miko	Kasuga deity	seated, playing a drum
15-6	miko	Kasuga deity	seated, pointing with a finger
16-1	monk	Kasuga deity	seated, pointing with a finger
16-2	monk	Kasuga deity	seated, praying
16-3	monk	Kasuga deity	seated, holding censer
16-4	woman	dead monk	seated, one sleeve slipping off
17-1	woman	Kasuga deity	seated on a beam
17-2	woman	Kasuga deity	seated on a ceiling
17-3	woman	Kasuga deity	seated, pointing with a finger
18-2	woman	Kasuga deity	seated, pointing with a finger

Table 1. Mediums in *Genkie*

*1. Sannō 山王 (also called Hie 日吉) shrine is located in Shiga prefecture.

*2. Atsuta 熱田 shrine is located in Aichi prefecture.

Figures 3–6 show examples of these scenes. Figure 3 is the first scene of *Genkie*. The medium here is a woman, possessed by the Kasuga deity. Monks, nobles and others are gathering before her to listen to the oracle. In Figure 4, the medium is a woman in a house; she is a *miko*. The monk, sitting before her, summons the Kasuga deity into her. She is now relaying the oracle. In Figure 5, The medium is an old monk seated at something like a little table (*kyōsoku* 脇息, or armrest); the other monks are his pupils. In Figure 6, the medium is again a woman. It is the spirit of a dead monk not a kami that possess her. He tells about hell through the woman's mouth. The monk in front of her is admonishing the dead monk's spirit.

¹⁰ Table 1 was referred to Yamamoto 2006, pp. 27–29.

¹¹ In these 3 cases, the mediums are all *miko* of Kasuga shrine. I think it an important problem.



Figure 3. *Genkie* scroll 1, dan 1.

Source: *Kasuga Gongen reigenki* (*Genkie*, a part of copy of the original), painted by Maeda Ujizane 前田氏実 and Nagai Ikuma 永井幾麻. Owned by Tokyo National Museum.

Image: TNM Image Archives Source: <http://TnmArchives.jp/>



Figure 4. *Genkie* scroll 15, dan 6.

Source: Ibid.

Image: TNM Image Archives Source: <http://TnmArchives.jp/>



Figure 5. *Genkie* scroll 16, *dan* 1.

Source: Ibid.

Image: TNM Image Archives Source: <http://TnmArchives.jp/>



Figure 6. *Genki* scroll 16, *dan* 4.

Source: Ibid.

Image: TNM Image Archives Source: <http://TnmArchives.jp/>

In these four cases, no mediums show unusual or abnormal behavior like in Figure 1. The other mediums in *Genkie* are passive and quite normal too. Many of them seem to be simply talking. Without understanding the stories, we cannot know who the medium is. Furthermore, the mediums, in three of the figures, are depicted with fingers pointing. In 9 of the 20 scenes, that is nearly half of the cases, mediums are painted with this distinctive gesture.¹² This mannerism is obviously of importance to the artist as a method for expressing a kami-like presence.

¹² Yamamoto 2006, p. 54.

Why are mediums depicted in this way? One of the notable points is their finger-pointing gesture. Actual mediums, in modern Japan, do not point with their fingers when they relay oracles.¹³ The suggestion is that mediums in medieval ages did not either. Evidently the painter chose this mannerism to clarify the conveyer of oracles. In *emakimono*, we can often find characters pointing with their fingers; in many cases, the gesture leads the viewer's eye to important things.¹⁴ In the scenes of spirit possession, the action indicates who is telling, who the conveyer of the oracle is. Figure 6 is significant in this regard. The scene is the only example in *Genkie* in which the possessing spirit is not a kami. The one who is finger pointing in this case is not the medium but the monk. The monk demands the dead monk's spirit, possessing the medium, to leave her. The monk is of higher court rank than both the dead monk and the medium woman in this situation. It is poor etiquette to point directly at a person's face with the finger in Japan.¹⁵ This action denotes the conveying of an instruction from one person to another. The one who can finger point directly is the one who occupies an elevated social position. Mediums are elevated higher than others when they are possessed by the kami, because they temporally become kami. The finger pointing symbolizes this fact.

Figure 6 also holds the clue for another problem, namely the stillness of the mediums. One sleeve of the woman's outer garment has slipped off.¹⁶ The reason is that, possessed by the dead monk's spirit, she has been acting in a violent fashion. In fact, mediums often behave wildly, jump, run or shout, when they are possessed not only by evil spirits but also by divine spirits.¹⁷ The disheveled outfit of the woman intimates the fact of violent action. At the same time, the painter avoids depicting signs of violence in Figures 3, 4, 5 and in the other scenes.

The distinction between Figure 6 and the others is the possessor. In Figure 6 it is the dead monk, namely an evil spirit. The others are Kasuga deities, divine spirits. In the scenes that Kasuga deities enter the bodies of mediums, their outfits are fine, not unusual. The painter chose the placid expression to represent the idea that the being is equivalent to a kami, especially Kasuga deities. *Genkie* was produced in praise of Kasuga deities. No wonder then that the people equivalent to the most divine being in this story, that is the mediums possessed by Kasuga deities, should not be depicted as abnormal.

Conclusion

As explained above, there are 20 paintings of spirit possession in *Genkie*. The spirit mediums in most of these are rendered as usual, and nearly half of them are depicted with fingers pointing. The reason why the painter chose these postures is to represent the mediums as comparable to divine beings.

¹³ See Hagiwara 1977. This book is a collection of *kamigakari* (possessed by kami) photographs.

¹⁴ Chino 1991, pp. 83–84.

¹⁵ Nomura 1996, pp. 150–53.

¹⁶ There is another same case: scroll 6, *dan 2*. In this case, the possessor is kami (Sannō deity), but not Kasuga deity. See Table 1.

¹⁷ The violent actions of possessed mediums are found in many pre-modern documents. See, for example, *Makura no sōshi* 1980 the second volume, pp. 169–171. For the examples in the last several decades, see Blacker 1986 and Hagiwara 1977.

I think these are images typical of mediums possessed by kami in the medieval ages. In this period, painters emphasized rather the sacred nature of possessed mediums rather than their unusual actions. It will be necessary to research other examples, especially those which feature people possessed by evil spirits. An examination of depictions of people possessed should lead to greater understanding of how such supernatural phenomena were understood in medieval Japan.

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