

Unusual Phenomena, Divination, and *Monoimi* in the Heian Period

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The word *monoimi* is well known to historians and philologists who study Heian history and literature. *Monoimi* is generally defined as a taboo against leaving the house or accepting visitors in the house. The period of the taboo was determined based on the results of a divination performed by an *on'yōji*. The divination was performed after an “unusual phenomenon” (*ayashii koto*) took place.

The earliest directions regarding unusual phenomena and *monoimi* are contained in *Jichū gun'yō*: “When something strange takes place, call for onyouji and order him to perform divination.” In Emperor Juntoku's *Kinpishō* it is said: “Do not leave the house during *monoimi*. Do everything behind curtains (*sudare*). . . . Make tablets from willow trees. Tie one to your *kanmuri*. Tie the second one to your left sleeve after the first birds sing in the mourning”.

A classical definition of *monoimi* was given by Ise Teijō (1718–1784): “Regarding *monoimi*: if you had a bad dream, or you are worried because something strange has happened, and *on'yōji*, having performed a divination, says that this is serious and you have to be cautious within several days, then you should spend these days at home, without leaving the house and without seeing anyone. You have to make three tablets from willow tree, write *monoimi* on them, tie them with *shinobugusa* and fasten them to *kanmuri* and *sudare*. You shall also write *monoimi* on the stripes of paper. It is generally accepted that this definition is based on Heian sources and describes the practice common for Heian.

It is impossible to overlook the significance of *monoimi* for Heian aristocracy: according to simple calculations people could spend up to forty days without leaving their houses because of *monoimi*.

However, the general approach to *monoimi* is to study it as a separate phenomenon. I would like to point out that it is necessary to study *monoimi* as a part of the complex, which also included divination and registration of unusual phenomena. Only having considered *monoimi* as a part of such a complex, we will be able to trace its history and find an answer to the question why *monoimi* was observed.

Monoimi in the sense outlined above is first mentioned at the beginning of the tenth century. However, the aforementioned complex started forming as early as the seventh century. Some of its elements were adopted from Chinese traditions which had a history of several centuries by that time.

The oldest divination technique, turtle shell divination, was borrowed by the Japanese from China in the fifth century. Later turtle shell divination became the jurisdiction of *Jingikan*, and it was employed in order to solve the problems of global

importance for the state. In *Nihon shoki* there is an account of the epidemics which spread in Japan in the fifth year of Emperor Sujin's reign. Half of the country's population fell dead, and Emperor issued a decree admitting that the epidemics was caused by the gods of heaven and earth as a punishment for poor government. Emperor ordered to perform a turtle shell divination. In course of the divination a kami called Ōmononushi entered a medium and told Emperor that it was this kami which caused the epidemics, as it needed worship.

It must be noted that in Sujin's order it is said that the epidemics is a punishment for poor governance. This is completely in line with the tradition of Chinese political thought, especially with the concept of "Heavenly reaction" (*tian yin*), according to which it was believed that Heaven could send warning signs (unusual phenomena) to Emperor to show him that he should change his political plans. In case of mistakes in the government Heaven could send calamities and disasters. However, according to *Nihon shoki*, it turned out that the real cause of the epidemics was not the will of Heaven, but that of a local kami, Ōmononushi.

Probably the reason for such a discrepancy between the idea of the emperor's decree and the result of the divination which followed the decree lies in the conflict between the official ideology rooted in Chinese thought, and local religious tradition based on cults of local kami. In any case, we must conclude that divination in Japan was performed in order to find out the will of specific local kami if it had become angry and produced *tatari*, thus causing disasters and calamities.

Such understanding of the nature of unusual phenomena can be found in the eighth-century sources. For example, it is said in *Shoku Nihongi* that in 782 the Jingikan (office of deities) and Onmyōryō (bureau of divination) were ordered to perform divination in order to find out the cause of unfavorable signs and calamities which spread around the country that year. The offices reported that the cause of the troubles was that the officials wore "simple clothes" during rituals, thus making the Great Deity of Ise and other kami produce *tatari*.¹

In *Shoku Nihongi* we find the following two types of the court's reaction toward unusual phenomena, calamities and unfavourable signs in the eighth century. Most often, the deity believed to have caused such phenomena was presented with offerings. In 731, lightning struck the building of the Jingikan and several officials died.² A divination was carried out and offerings were sent to all shrines of the Kinai and seven regions.³ In 772, lightning struck the western pagoda of Saidaiji and divination showed that it was caused by *tatari* from the deity worshiped in Koya-jinja located in Ōmi province.⁴ In 772 regular offerings were established to the deity Tsukuyomi, who had, the divination indicated, caused the storm.⁵

The other type of reaction toward unusual phenomena and disasters was to carry out purification or pacification rites at the place where such phenomena were seen. In 742, a fox's head was found in Naniwa, and after this a pacification rite was performed.⁶ In 777, a great purification ceremony (*ōharae*) was performed and Buddhist monks were ordered to read sutras in the palace because unusual phenomena had

often been seen there. Probably, it was felt, this was caused by the *onryō* of Empress Inoe (Inoe no naishinnō, 717–775) and her son prince Osabe (761–775).⁷

Obviously, offerings were sent to a deity in order to pacify it and thus prevent calamities. Purification and pacification rites were performed in order to exorcise deities or spirits that caused unusual phenomena.

During the reigns of Emperors Kōnin (770–781) and Kanmu (781–806), we see a sharp growth of the number of bad signs. In the late eighth century we see the first evidences that unusual phenomena were perceived as signs of future calamities, and divination was employed to determine the cause and nature of future disasters. In 796, a lake in Aso province dried up. Divination showed that this was a sign of future drought and epidemics. Buddhist monks were ordered to read sutras.⁸ An eruption of Mt. Fuji in 802 was understood in the same way.⁹

In the account of *Ruijū kokushi* dated 830, the term *mokke* is used for the first time to denote unusual phenomena. It is said that after *mokke* happened, the Buddhist monks were ordered to read *Kongo hannya kyō*, and the Jingikan performed purification rites.¹⁰ Probably the word *mokke* was used to refer to the unusual phenomena associated with appearance of animals in the palace.

At the beginning of the ninth century, it was believed that the unusual phenomena seen in the palace might be connected with the spirits of deceased emperors. According to *Nihon kiryaku*, in 827, after a fox's voice was heard in the palace, it was decided to send envoys to Kanmu's tomb.¹¹ After an unusual phenomena in 831, Buddhist monks were sent to the tombs of Emperor Kanmu and Princess (posthumous title Empress) Koshi. The monks were instructed to read sutras with the purpose to "prevent *mokke*" (*mokke o fusegu*).¹²

It was still believed that the *tatari* from kami could be the cause of unusual phenomena. For example, in 840 a rank was granted to Ōmonoimi kami worshipped in Dewa province, as the divination showed that *tatari* from this kami caused *mokke*.¹³ It must also be mentioned that in the 840s the first records appear saying that in order to prevent future epidemics, which were forecast based on unusual phenomena, deities of epidemics (*ekijin*) were worshipped in shrines.

According to *Shoku Nihon kōki*, in 844 interpretation of unusual phenomena became the topic of a court discussion. As a result of the discussion it was decided that the cause of *mokke* should be determined by a process of divination.¹⁴

In the middle of the ninth century we see the first evidences that unusual phenomena were perceived not only as signs of future calamities, but also as the signs of the emperor's illness. According to *Nihon sandai jitsuroku*, in 866, Jingikan and Onmyōryō performed divination and identified that a fire in the palace was the sign of the emperor's coming illness. Offerings were sent to the kami of all shrines in the Nankaidō.¹⁵

This shows that the two types of reaction to unusual phenomena still existed in the ninth century. Kami were presented with offerings (or granted ranks), and various rites (purification, recitation of sutras, etc.) were performed at the places where

unusual phenomena were seen.

It seems interesting to analyze the recitation of sutras in more detail. It could be performed immediately at the place where unusual phenomena were seen, but it could also be done at the place where a respective kami (or spirit of dead) was worshipped. I suggest that this rite might be connected with the belief that by reading sutras it was possible to help a kami or a spirit of *dead* redeem the misdeeds committed in the past life and thus be granted a better next life.

In *Nihon ryōiki* there is a story of Taga no ōkami, a deity worshipped in Ōmi province that had the body of a monkey. In his previous life, this deity was a king in India who oppressed Buddhism. Seeking a better life, the deity turned to a Buddhist monk and asked him to read the Lotus Sutra. The monk refused. The deity wanted to participate in recitation of sutras in a temple, but the abbot prohibited it. Then the monks saw a small white monkey on the roof of the temple, after which several halls of the temple fell in ruins. The monkey was let into the community and the calamities ceased. It is clear that this story is based not only on the Buddhist beliefs regarding reading of sacred texts as a way to salvation, but also on the concept of *tatari* produced by the anger of kami.

In this regard it is important to highlight the difference in interpretation of *tatari* in the eighth century and in the second half of the ninth century. As was demonstrated above, in the records of *Shoku Nihongi*, unusual phenomena that had the nature of disasters were attributed to *tatari*. In later records, *tatari* are cited as causes unusual phenomena that are not disastrous, and serve merely as signs of future calamities. Several interesting records illustrating this change are contained in *Nihon sandai jitsuroku*. In 863 divination carried out by *Jingikan* showed that appearance of a comet was a sign of *tatari* from Amaterasu. Offerings were sent to Ise to prevent calamities.¹⁶ In 886 news came from Awa province of a storm which had lasted for more than a day. Divination performed by *Onmyōryō* showed that *tatari* was caused by the anger *goryō*, and that epidemics and a rebellion are likely to happen in the province.¹⁷

Summarizing the above, in the second half of the ninth century it was believed that if a kami or a spirit of dead was angry and produced *tatari*, first unusual phenomena appeared, which were not disastrous. If the kami was not propitiated with offerings or pacified with reading of sutras or with other rites, then *tatari* could cause calamities. In the ninth century the scope of beings which were believed to be able to cause unusual phenomena became wider: not only local kami, but also spirits of dead members of royal family, *goryō* and deities of epidemics were included in the scope.

Now I would like to turn to aristocratic diaries of the tenth century and to analyze the functions of *on'yōji* in respect of unusual phenomena in the Heian period. In an entry in his diary *Teishinkōki* in 931, Fujiwara no Tadahira wrote that *on'yōji* performed divination after a cow entered a hall in the palace. The divination showed that the officials born in certain years might fall ill. The days were specified when that officials should observe *monoimi*.¹⁸ This is the earliest record where an unusual phenomenon and *monoimi* are mentioned together.

Thus, by the middle of the tenth century the complex which included registration of unusual phenomena, divination and *monoimi*, had been established. I would like to draw an example which would illustrate the mechanism of functioning of the complex and details of observing *monoimi*.

In his *Shōyūki*, Fujiwara no Sanesuke tells that in 1012 he received from his brother Fujiwara no Kanehira a letter saying that one evening some days before, a loud sound (similar to that of a falling tree) was heard within the precincts of Kasuga taisha, the family shrine of Fujiwara. Fujiwara no Sanesuke asked Kamo no Mitsuyoshi to perform a divination, and Mitsuyoshi determined that the head of Fujiwara family, as well as men of the clan bourn the years of cock, cow and sheep, and women bourn in the years of serpent, pig and rabbit are likely to get ill. Such persons should observe *monoimi* in the days of *kinoe* and *kinoto* within thirty days of the day when the strange sound was heard, and in certain days in future.¹⁹

Analysis of *Shōyūki* shows that Fujiwara no Kanehira, born in 953 (year of the ox), and Fujiwara no Michitsuna born in 955 (year of the rabbit), observed *monoimi* on the days specified by Kamo no Mitsuyoshi.²⁰ In Fujiwara no Michinaga's *Midō kampakuki*, these days are marked as "the days of *monoimi*" (*monoimi no hi*). Probably, the scroll of calendar used by Michinaga, the head of the Fujiwara family at that time, to write his diary, was marked by his secretary after the divination. In some of these days Michinaga observed *monoimi*,²¹ but on the other days he accepted visitors.²²

It must be mentioned that sometimes Michinaga ordered supplementary divination to be carried out in order to define whether *monoimi* in the specific day should be light (*karui*) of serious (*omoī*). Probably no certain rules existed with regards to what could or could not be done during light *monoimi*. According to *Shōyūki*, during a light *monoimi* it is prohibited to leave the house but it is not prohibited to accept visitors.²³ However, it was believed that breaking the taboo was dangerous. For example, Fujiwara no Tadanobu was believed to have fallen ill because during *monoimi* he had gone to the scene of a fire at the home of Fujiwara no Yorimichi.²⁴

One of the most interesting problems associated with *monoimi* is the problem of the reasons for observing it. I would like to analyze a few examples from different sources which may further clarify this matter. In the record of 1015, in *Shōyūki*, there is a story of Emperor Sanjō's *monoimi*. On'yōji Abe no Yoshihira reported that a spirit of illness (*ekiki*) was producing *tatari* (*tatari o dasu*), and that was why the emperor should observe *monoimi* for two days.²⁵ In the corresponding entry in *Midō kampakuki*, Michinaga reported that the spirit of illness was identified as the spirit of Gasei (887–967), a deceased Tendai monk who was angry at the royal family because Emperor Reizei had stood in the way of his becoming the head of Tendai. Sanjō issued a decree granting Gasei the *sōjō* rank.

In *Honchō seiki* it is recorded that in 994, during an outbreak of an epidemic, a rumor spread in Heian that soon a spirit of illness would pass through the capital and thus men and women should not leave their homes. Aristocrats and common people

alike closed the doors of their houses.²⁶ A similar situation is described in the record of 1152.²⁷

In *Konjaku monogatari* there is a story about an *on'yōji* who was called to a house where the head of the family had died. The *on'yōji* told the family that a spirit (*oni*) would come to the house and it was therefore necessary to observe *monoimi*. The *on'yōji* went on to say that the spirits might enter the house through the gates. He instructed the family to attach to the gates a tablet with the word *monoimi* inscribed, to lock the gates, and to perform a rite with willow tablets. These examples show that the inhabitants of Heian were afraid that *tatari* produced by angry spirits or the spirits themselves could enter the house thus causing illness or other calamities.

By way of conclusion, I would like to offer a summary of the findings of the analysis of the complex, which included registration of unusual phenomena, divination, and *monoimi*:

- 1) At the beginning of the eighth century, unfavorable signs and unusual phenomena were interpreted as caused by the anger of local kami. Divination was employed in order to identify the specific kami that produced *tatari*. The kami then was presented with offerings. If the unusual phenomena were caused by presence of spirits of dead, sutras were recited at the place where unusual phenomena were seen, and pacification and purification rites were performed.
- 2) In the second half of the ninth century, it was believed that if a kami or a spirit of dead was angry and produced *tatari*, unusual phenomena appeared, but ordinarily those were not—at first—disastrous. If the kami was not propitiated with offerings or pacified with reading of sutras or with other rites, however, then *tatari* could cause calamities.
- 3) In the ninth century, the scope of beings that were believed to be able to cause unusual phenomena became wider: not only local kami, but also spirits of dead members of the royal family, *goryō*, and deities of epidemics were included in the scope.
- 4) By the middle of the tenth century, the complex that included registration of unusual phenomena, divination, and *monoimi*, had been established.
- 5) *Monoimi* was observed because the inhabitants of Heian were afraid that *tatari* produced by angry spirits or the spirits themselves could enter the house thus causing illness or other calamities.

NOTES

1 Enryaku 1.7.29 (782)

2 Tempyō 2.6.29 (731).

3 Tempyō 2.16.17 (731).

4 Hōki 3.4.28 (772).

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- 5 Hōki 3.8.6 (772).
- 6 Tempyō 13.i3.19 (742).
- 7 Hōki 8.3.19, 8.3.21 (777).
- 8 *Nihon kōki*, Enryaku 15.7.22 (796).
- 9 Enryaku 21.1.8 (802).
- 10 Tenchō 7.12.21 (830).
- 11 Tenchō 4.11.6 (827).
- 12 Tenchō 8.6.20, 8.6.26 (831).
- 13 Jōwa 7.7.26 (840).
- 14 Jōwa 11.8.5 (844).
- 15 Jōgan 8.7.6 (866).
- 16 Jōgan 5.7.2 (853).
- 17 Ninna 2.8.4 (886).
- 18 Jōhei 1.8.6 (931).
- 19 Kankō 9.6.16 (1012).
- 20 Kankō 9.6.28; Kankō 9.6.18 (1012).
- 21 Kankō 9.7.18, 19; Kankō 9.i10.11 (1012); Kankō 10.1.12 (1013).
- 22 Kankō 10.1.3; Kankō 10.1.13; Kankō 10.4.3 (1013).
- 23 Kanna 1.6.10 (985).
- 24 Kannin 4.10.5 (1020).
- 25 Chōwa 4.6.19 (1015).
- 26 Shōryaku 5.6.16 (994).
- 27 Ninhei 2.5.18 (1152).