

Different Perspectives on Niutsuhime

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The purpose of this essay, reflecting as it does ongoing research, is to introduce to the reader information about the Japanese non-Buddhist deity Niutsuhime 丹生都比売 and her image and place in Japanese history. One of the aims of the symposium at which this paper was presented was to open up discussion about ways in which working as a foreign researcher in Japan can influence one's study. For my part, I have found the Japanese concern with the distinctness of their identity to be overwhelmingly prevalent and this has impacted significantly on my work. This concern relates directly to the recognition and celebration of aspects of culture as "traditional," and the spread of information regarding them, and is therefore important to any consideration of religion, history, and art. It is especially important as a non-Japanese to be aware of this issue because much of what constitutes the Japanese cultural identity of today, particularly with regard to the designation of "cultural properties," was constructed as a reaction to non-Japanese cultures during the postwar period. At that time, the defeated nation found pride in their culture, and the government of the time determined that a contribution could be made to the world through "Japanese culture." A self-consciousness that came about as a result of opening to foreign cultures was the origin of new concepts about culture.¹

Living in Japan is of course an enormous help when it comes to examining its culture and makes possible discussions with specialists as well as non-specialists. In order to comprehend the issues of identity that may influence notions of culture in Japan, grass-roots communication

* I would like to thank Niu Kōichi for his generous help and Kongōbuji, Oriental Press, and a private collector for allowing me the use of the images in this essay.

¹ See Satō 2007 (forthcoming). Another useful publication on the subject of identity and culture is Denoon 2001.

with a wide range of people, accompanied by more conventionally academic text-based study, is essential. Today, two projects to “internationalize” and to define Japanese identity continue in Japan, and all non-Japanese scholars of Japanese culture must be aware that these issues cannot be ignored in their work.

A second issue that became important to me as a non-Japanese studying Japanese culture was that of my own possibly biased interpretations of it. A depiction of Aizen Myōō 愛染明王 of the Buddhist pantheon in Japan, by an early seventeenth century Italian woodcut print designer (Figure 1), can provide an illustration of the processes that occur in attempting to interpret unfamiliar foreign images of deities. It is quite different from the Aizen Myōō depicted by a Japanese (Figure 2). Such images of Japanese deities as this Italian one would have been conveyed to the West through recollection or sketches made by Jesuit priests who had visited Japan. This depiction clearly reflects a process of “filtration” from East to West, from esoteric Buddhism to Christianity. The hands are held together in a prayer-like posture—the customary *vajra* and bell discarded—and what would be hair flaming up and out from the deity’s head has been replaced by something resembling feathers or wings. This print was published in an appendix to a collection of pictures of deities, predominantly Greek and Roman. The Western cultural and religious context in which it was produced can be discerned; uniformity of presentation within



Fig. 1. *Aizen Myōō* by Bolognino Zaltieri, 1647, from Lorenzo Pignoria's *Seconda Parte delle Immagini de gli Dei Indiani* (Images of the Indian Gods, Part Two). Woodcut print.



Fig. 2. *Seated Aizen Myōō*, Edo period. Kongōbuji, Wakayama. Colors on wood, H.40.0 cm.

a publication containing images of deities of other cultures was undoubtedly also sought. Consciously or subconsciously, the artist dealt with these two issues: consciously or subconsciously non-Japanese art historians looking at Japanese art must deal with them too, even if theirs is a depiction in words, for we tend to read and interpret our subjects of study and transmit what we find in the terms most familiar to us, and to pass over what cannot easily be digested.

Our interpretations are unavoidably informed by our respective cultures. Great figures of Japanese culture are sometimes presented as more or less equivalent to Western aspects such as when Unkei is labeled “the Michelangelo of Japanese sculpture,” Chikamatsu “the Shakespeare of Japan,” or Okamoto Tarō as a “Picasso.” These equivalents are not stated solely by foreign scholars but also Japanese. Finding “equivalents” might be an unavoidable part of the process of understanding a very different culture, but it may not be a completely innocuous tendency with regard to our attitudes concerning other cultures, especially if we consider the fact that—as far as I am aware—the process doesn’t operate the other way around, that is, one would not call Michelangelo “the Unkei of Italy.” These are not really equivalents; the West is clearly the standard by which the non-Western is measured. In the nineteenth century it was remarked by a European scholar, and widely believed, that, “Asian thought is comprehensible and interpretable within Europe-

an thought, but not vice versa... European thought has to provide the context and categories for the exploration of all traditions of thought.”² When Western scholars first officially visited Japan to examine its art in the 1950s, one, an American, reported that there were “indigenous scholars” and that, obviously surprisingly to him, they were “reliable.”³

Joseph Kitagawa, a scholar of Japanese religion, stresses that Western categories should not be applied without great caution to the study of non-Western systems of belief. He points out that in Western criticism, “religion” is seen to be quite separate from other areas of life.⁴ This clearly does not apply to Japan of the past or even the present. A similar attitude was demonstrated by theologian Rudolf Otto in the 1950s, who entreated his reader to “direct his mind to a moment of deeply-felt religious experience, as little as possible qualified by other forms of consciousness. Whoever cannot do this, whoever knows no such moments in his experience, is requested to read no further.”⁵

Religion was seen as an area of life reserved for certain, specific matters and as a transcendent experience isolated from all other phenomena. Religious studies and art history have both developed since then, but traces of the conviction of the superiority of European categories linger. Studying so-called “religious” art in Japan I agree with Kitagawa and try to understand art images and objects in terms of their function in the Japan of the period in which they were created. Such an endeavor requires a wide-lensed approach, drawing on many disciplines. The fact that this approach has been deemed necessary more often by non-Japanese studying Japanese art history than by Japanese in the same field is undoubtedly in part attributable to the problems of interpretation particular to outsiders and an awareness of the importance of sensitive and correct contextualization of a practice, work, or image. I have found this wide approach to be more common among non-Japanese students than among their Japanese counterparts. Yet while one must as a non-Japa-

² Kitagawa 1990, p. xii

³ Conversation with Satō Naoko, Senior Specialist, Agency for Cultural Affairs. December 2004.

⁴ Kitagawa 1990, p. xiv.

⁵ Otto 1958, p. 8.

nese take care not to interpret Japanese culture according to one's own categories, one must also be aware of the preoccupation in Japan with cultural identity mentioned above.

I was drawn to the subject of the native Japanese female deity, Niutsuhime, for a number of reasons. Firstly, I was struck by the scarcity of information in both Japanese and non-Japanese publications regarding the non-Buddhist female deities that appear in Japanese art. Also, issues of gender and feminism are not yet widely applied in the study of the history of art in Japan.⁶ In the West, nineteenth century notions of a single "great goddess," a 1970s Western feminism that made "the goddess" a singular archetype⁷ that might be a liberating model for women, or found in "matriarchal cultures" a lost golden-age of female power, and recent associations of goddesses with "New Age religions" have all obscured their historical and religious significance.⁸ These associations have also contributed to misunderstandings about the means and goals of feminism and gender studies and made the subject of female deities less amenable to study. Japan has a history of feminism particular to its cultural and social milieu. However, goddesses in Japanese history have received far less scholarly attention than have those deities recognized as male.⁹ For this reason I find Niutsuhime to be an attractive and timely subject that may yield valuable information about Japanese religions as well as gender.

I was also intrigued by issues of visibility and concealment in Japanese religious art. It is a basic assumption in the West that a visual image is made in order to be seen, and for comparative study, the *hibutsu* 秘仏 (hidden buddhas) of Japan can challenge conventional ideas about production and function of an image. It was also of interest to me that much pre-Buddhist spiritual practice (I hesitate to use the term "Shinto" to re-

⁶ See Chino 1996.

⁷ For this reason I will avoid using the term "goddess" in this article.

⁸ Marija Gimbutas' body of work from 1956-1991 was, in particular, subjected to harsh criticism. A history of the academic and literary treatment of goddesses is provided in Hutton 1997. Also of interest is Billington and Green 1996.

⁹ With the exception, perhaps, of Amaterasu 天照, although here gender itself is still a subject of debate. See Bocking 2001.

fer to practices preceding the introduction of, or apart from, Buddhism since its use is much contested)¹⁰ did not employ images of deities and indeed ritual practice in Shinto today cannot be said to center on a visual object of worship. These practices make it clear that understanding Japanese Buddhist images and images of kami 神 may be hindered by assumptions we make to, say, Christian devotional images in Europe, and might benefit more from a comprehension of the significance of such works as tomb paintings and inscriptions which “did not have to be seen and read at all: it sufficed that they were there and they took effect by the very fact of their existence.”¹¹

Focusing on one particular deity and her artistic representation throughout history also enables me to examine the changes and developments in Japanese religion and to clarify in particular the intersection of different religious spheres. Niutsuhime can be related to pre-Buddhist mountain-based spiritual practices, to Shingon 真言 and its founder Kūkai 空海, to both the imperial court and the military government, and to relic worship. Here again, presuppositions both Western and Japanese concerning Japanese religious practices can be challenged, and many recent studies have done so. It is becoming increasingly clear that Shinto, Taoism, Buddhism, and even Confucianism cannot be easily separated and understood apart from each other. They developed together and often deeply affected one another.¹² This article does not itself address gender in detail or problems regarding studies of goddesses in general, nor discuss in depth issues of visibility and concealment. I discussed these above as parts of my explanation of my interest in my subject and the challenges it offered me specifically as a non-Japanese. I would like from now to present an introduction to my continuing research on this subject and some remarks concerning my approach.

My approaches to the issue of deity and image have led me to many

¹⁰ Beliefs in deities previous to the sixth century introduction of Buddhism to Japan cannot properly be called Shinto (the term is medieval) and we must take care not to project a modern construction of Shinto back onto practices of the past. See Kuroda 1993, pp.7-30, and Grapard 1983, pp.125-32.

¹¹ Wallis 1973, p. 23.

¹² A summary of the issue may be found in Grapard 1992, pp. 7-13.

surprising results. For example, initially, I expected to find reflections in images of Niutsuhime of the things she was known to have been associated with at different times—the mineral cinnabar, mercury, water sources, rain, agriculture, and weaving. Such a preconception was motivated perhaps by the fixed iconography of Egyptian deities and by the symbolic attributes of the sacred figures of Christian art as well as by familiarity with images of Buddhist deities replete with identifying characteristics. The thwarted search for similar features raised questions for me concerning the definition and function of a sacred image in Japan. Let me give a brief outline of Niutsuhime's history before addressing these issues.

Her name means “female deity of the place of cinnabar” and shrines dedicated to Niutsuhime are found in over a hundred sites all over Japan that were once mined for the mercury, which is produced from cinnabar ore.¹³ She has an important role in Japan's myths of its origins. Daughter of Izanagi, she was sent down from Takamagahara 高天原 to teach people methods of grain cultivation. The *Niu Daimyōjin norito* 丹生大明神祝詞,¹⁴ a ritual prayer written in 710, relates that she appeared in Kii no kuni and travelled to Yoshino where she taught agriculture and weaving and finally settled in Amano 天野 at the foot of Mt. Kōya. The *Harima fudoki* 播磨風土記 commissioned in 713 contains a reference to a ‘Nihotsuhime’ 爾保都比売 who aids Jingū Kōgō 神功皇后 in her invasion of Sil-la by recommending in an oracle that she coat her boats with red earth.¹⁵ It is possible to identify this deity with Niutsuhime.¹⁶ Cinnabar, being red, was seen as having protective powers. The *norito* identifies Niutsuhime with Wakahirume no mikoto 稚日女命, Amaterasu's younger sister, who appears in the *Nihon shoki* 日本書紀 and *Kojiki* 古事記 as the heavenly weaving maiden. Niutsuhime's tie to the imperial family, then, is established by 710 and confirmed in the official annals. Although there is no direct reference to Niutsuhime, the annals also record a ritual for success in battle by Jinmu Tennō 神武天皇 that involves using cinnabar in

¹³ Matsuda 1970, pp. 44-46.

¹⁴ The *norito* and an explanation of it can be found in Taniguchi 2003, pp. 42-52.

¹⁵ *Shoku Nihongi* 続日本紀, scroll 11. The relevant passage is given in Matsuda 1970, p. 37.

¹⁶ Matsuda 1970, p. 37.

the Niu River. It is known that Niutsuhime was worshipped as a river deity here.¹⁷ Here again the relation between Niutsuhime/cinnabar, the imperial family, and military power is apparent.

Before proceeding to the relationship of Kūkai, the founder of Shingon Buddhism in Japan, with this deity, let us note a reference to cinnabar in his 797 work *Indications of the Goals of the Three Teachings* (*Sangō shiiki* 三教指帰).¹⁸ He refers to the Taoist alchemical practice of covering one's body in cinnabar in order to gain immortality. Kūkai was aware of the spiritual importance of cinnabar and mercury and would also have known of the Niu clan who mined it. Both the *norito* and other documents¹⁹ relate that the Niu clan's hold over the land stretched wide over Kii and Yamato, and we know that Kūkai practiced Shugendō 修験道, which included strains of Taoism, in this area before he went to T'ang to study Shingon. It is also said that he encountered Niutsuhime on Kōya while he was there alone practising austerities.²⁰ The success of Kūkai's plan to build a temple complex on Kōya depended not only on obtaining permission from the emperor but also on cultivating a good relationship with the Niu clan and their deities. Politically speaking, he incorporated them into his scheme. Perhaps he also had in mind the economic value of cinnabar at that time. The story of how this incorporation came about is recorded in the early twelfth century *Konjaku monogatari* 今昔物語 and various other texts. Kūkai met a hunter on Kōya who agreed to cede land to him and directed him to the site where he was subsequently to build Kongōbuji.²¹ I will return to this text below, in connection with Niutsuhime.

Niutsuhime shrine maintained ties to the imperial family and was particularly favored in the Kamakura period when Hōjō Masako 北条政

¹⁷ According to the *Kii zoku fudoki* 紀伊続風土記 (completed 1839) Amaterasu, as a water deity, descended to the Niu River in the form of Niutsuhime.

¹⁸ Haketa 1984.

¹⁹ It is also related in the seventeenth century *Niuhafuriuji honkeichō* 丹生祝氏本系帳. A photograph is provided in *Amano no rekishi to geinō: Niutsuhime jinja to Amano no meihō* 天野の歴史と芸能 - 丹生都比売神社と天野の名宝, Wakayama Prefectural Museum, 2003, p.76.

²⁰ Turner 2001, p. 38.

子 became its primary donor. Niutsuhime and the other deities moved to the shrine during this period became very famous after they had emerged from their shrines to assist in the defense of the realm against the Mongols.

I would like next to consider representations of native deities. One of the first problems to confront a scholar unfamiliar with Japanese culture is the definition and use of a sacred image itself. *Shinzō* 神像, images in sculpture or painting of kami, could serve as *shintai* 神体—the “body” of the kami—often kept in a shrine. But a *shintai* could also be a jewel, mirror, or other object. The *shintai* was not intended to be representational but rather was considered a vessel for the kami’s “spirit.” A vessel not only contains but also marks one space (inner) off from another (outer). It might be said that a painted or sculpted image is similar to any material used to mark a sacred space, the most important thing being that a power is acknowledged by demarcating its boundaries. Thus demarcated it can be worshipped, appeased, manipulated, transported from one place to another, and so forth. On the other hand, a prayer by Amaterasu in the *Nihon shoki* regarding the mirror perhaps indicates that it was meant to represent her in some visual way, while still functioning as a repository of her “spirit”:

...Amaterasu no Oho-kami took in her hand the precious mirror, and, giving it to Ame no Oshi-ho-mimi no Mikoto, uttered a prayer, saying: - ‘My child, when thou lookest upon this mirror, let it be as if thou wert looking on me.’²²

As a reflector of light, this orb-shaped mirror may be seen to symbolize the sun, and Amaterasu is, after all, the sun deity. As a *shintai* it is an appropriate vessel for containing the spirit as it may be said to contain light. However, there is also a suggestion in Amaterasu’s words that the

²¹ This story is a “type” that occurs in many *engi* (literature relating the origins of shrine-temple multiplexes) that involve the opening of mountains, especially *Shugendō engi*. The configuration of characters is a particular characteristic of *Shugendō engi*. See Kageyama 1976, p. 67.

²² Aston 1972, p. 83.

reflection of the face of the viewer may him or herself represent the deity. Throughout the history of visual and literary portrayals of kami there is an occasional discomfort with the practice of depicting the face. The painting of the Kasuga deity is the most famous example of this.²³ Intriguingly, the mirror is also of significance, it seems, in some Buddhist practices. In one important Shingon ritual, the *nyūga-ga'nyū* 入我我入, which concerns identification of the body, speech, and mind of practitioner with deity, or expression of non-duality of the two, one is instructed to look at the principal deity as if one were looking at one's own reflection in a mirror.²⁴ The fascinating connections between the mirror, the reflected viewer's face, and depictions of a kami's face require further exploration.

Another fundamental difference between "Shinto" sculptures and other images, not only Western ones, is that they were not produced primarily in order to be seen and were (and are still today) intentionally concealed from view. Although the available images of Niutsuhime are painted, not sculpted, and were intended to be seen by devotees, and members of confraternities (*kō* 講),²⁵ it is worth keeping in mind the attitudes that surrounded non-Buddhist images in general.²⁶

Niutsuhime appears mostly in paintings on silk, and paper, once on a Buddhist reliquary, and as an inscribed wooden plaque.²⁷ It is said that

²³ *Manifestation of Kasuga Myōjin* by Takashina Takakane, 14th century, Fujita Art Museum, Osaka.

²⁴ See Sharf 2001, p. 183.

²⁵ However, it is possible that the paintings were once based on a sculpture.

²⁶ It is difficult to definitively distinguish between Buddhist and "Shinto" images because images of native deities began to be made after the importation of Buddhist images and the start of their production in Japan and were influenced stylistically and presumably, to an extent, conceptually.

²⁷ At Kongōji (Takahatafudōson), Hino, Tokyo. A photo is available in Kageyama 1973, p. 42. The wooden plaques, dated 1341, represent the five *gongen* of Kongō-ji-Niu Daimyōjin, Kōya Daimyōjin, Hachiman, Inari Daimyōjin, and Seiryū Gongen. The plaques are inscribed with the deities' names and those of their *honji* in Chinese characters and seed syllables. The symbolic forms are also shown.

the plaque replaced a decayed sculpture, indicating that sculptural images had existed and perhaps still do.²⁸ According to the *Kii shoku fudoki* it was said that *ita-e* 板絵—paintings on wood panels—of the deities by Kūkai are enshrined at Kōya.²⁹ The *Konjaku monogatari* describes the deity. Niu Myōjin (Niutsuhime) appears in the form of a woodcutter Kūkai meets at a river after being guided there by a hunter (Kōya Myōjin) and he describes himself as “the king of this mountain.” He grants Kūkai

land and then identifies himself as “Niu Myōjin.”³⁰ Interestingly, Niutsuhime here is male but almost all portrayals show the deity as female.

An early picture of Niutsuhime, dating from the Kamakura period (Figure 3), one of a pair—the other being of Kariba Myōjin 狩場明神 (Kōya Myōjin)—shows the deity as a court lady. She is dressed in luxurious robes with a fashionable *hosoge* floral pattern, long hair flowing down her back, and *tenjō mayu*, the painted-in eyebrows that were the mark of an aristocratic woman. This depiction is not one specific to Niutsuhime; from the mid-Heian period Shinto shrines were influenced by Heian palace architecture and the deities were represented as Heian aristocrats. A painted image of Mikomori Myōjin 御子守明神 of the Nanbokuchō period,³¹ for example, closely resembles the picture of Niutsuhime—it could almost be the



Fig. 3. *Niu Myōjin*, Kamakura period. Kongōbuji, Wakayama. Color on silk, 83.0 × 41.0 cm.

²⁸ Kageyama 1973, p. 44.

²⁹ Kageyama 1976, p. 82.

³⁰ Dykstra 1998, pp. 65-66.

same subject from a different angle. The *shikishi* (poem sheet) on the painting tells of Niutsuhime's devotion to Miroku and her hope for salvation through Buddhism. The Taizōkai 胎藏界 (Womb World) *shūji* 種字 (seed syllable), "a-ku," is painted in a circle above the deity. It corresponds to Niutsuhime's *honji* 本地, or "buddha essence," Taizōkai Dainichi Nyorai 胎藏界大日如来. According to the *honji suijaku* 本地垂迹 idea which arose during the Heian period, buddhas manifested themselves as kami in Japan. Taizōkai Dainichi Nyorai was a manifestation of Dainichi Nyorai, the central deity in Shingon Buddhism. The identification of Niutsuhime with this manifestation, then, reflects her significance in Shingon metaphysics. The presence of the seed syllable indicates the picture was made for a ritual purpose. Niutsuhime could also be indicated in a symbolic form (*sanmayagyō* 三昧耶形). The function of such images of syllables and symbolic forms as well as representations of deities in human form should be taken into account because they were tools for ritual practices. Identification with a Buddhist deity, or expression of the original non-duality of practitioner and deity could be achieved in Shingon practice through rituals which involved pictorial or sculptural representations of the deity.

Niutsuhime was also depicted with Kūkai and Kōya Myōjin in compositions that showed the harmonious relationship between the three that came about with the opening of Mt. Kōya (Figure 4). Kūkai, in the *shinnyo* 真如 enlightenment position is above and between the two deities, and slightly larger, emphasizing his importance and perhaps his role as a unifier of the deities and Shingon Buddhism. Above is shown the Okunoin, Kūkai's mausoleum, and below is Amano—Niutsuhime's shrine, the shrines of three other deities, and the surrounding area.³² The composition reflects *honji suijaku* theory as it integrates Shinto and Buddhism and places Buddhism in a superior position, reflected by the relative positions of the figures and the buildings connected to them.³³ Kōya Myōjin

³¹ *Yoshino Mikomori Myōjin*, Nanbokuchō period, Fujita Shinzō, Tokyo.

³² Incidentally, the oldest landscape painting related to the Amano shrine.

³³ This painting is known as *Kōya mondōkō honzon* 高野問答講本尊 (*Main Deities for the Question and Answer Presentation*). A similar painting is still used today, every year, in a study examination held at Kongōbuji on Kōya.



Fig. 4. *Kōbō Daishi, Niu Myōjin, and Kōya Myōjin*, Kamakura period (ca.1191). Kongōbuji, Wakayama. Color on silk, 212.0 × 127.5 cm.

is shown here as a courtier. From late Heian onwards there was a growing abhorrence of hunting and the consumption of four-footed creatures and social exclusion of hunters who ate them,³⁴ which may also account for the courtly image that seems to become more common than his portrayal as a hunter. Possibly, Kariba Myōjin's metamorphosis into a courtly gentleman and then into a warrior, was to intended make his depiction compatible with that of Niutsuhime. Also, by the time this picture was made, Niutsuhime had come to be considered his mother.³⁵ This may reflect a shift in religious notions regarding motherhood. Women came to be seen during the medieval period as, above all, mothers.³⁶

The depiction of the two deities in similarly aristocratic clothes, both in a sitting posture and turned towards each other suggests a relationship of familiarity—son and mother or else courtier and consort. In either type of relationship Niutsuhime's reproductive capacity as a woman is emphasized, which reflects the roles expected of upper class women dur-

³⁴ Blacker 1996.

³⁵ Kadoya 1998.

³⁶ See Glassman 2001.

ing the Heian and into the Kamakura period.³⁷ Here Niutsuhime's image signifies functions quite different from those she had been connected with such as cinnabar production, water production, and weaving.³⁸ Clearly her artistic representation changed with changing society.

A variation on this composition developed in the early Kamakura period when two other deities were enshrined at Amano—Kehi Daimyōjin 氣比大明神 and Ichikishima Daimyōjin 市杵島大明神 (Figure 5). This occurred after Gyōshō Shōnin 行勝上人 had a dream in which Niutsuhime instructed him to bring the deities to Amano. He related this to the priests at Amano shrine and permission was granted by Hōjō Masako. In such paintings Kūkai is again allotted the most important position and is physically larger than the deities.³⁹

In 1281, on the occasion of the second Mongol invasion attempt the deities' aid was sought. The incident is recorded in the *Dajōkan chōtsumushi* 太政官牒写⁴⁰ which describes how over one thousand birds flew away from the shrine. A few days later at dawn the shrine buildings began to rumble, a curious light emerged from them and the deities left for battle, headed by Niutsuhime. After yet another incident, the shrine received a sword from the Kamakura bakufu and continued to receive swords from warriors. Paintings were made to show the four deities leaving their shrines for battle with the Mongols (Figure 6). Niutsuhime as a warrior

³⁷ Another example of the treatment and presentation of female Shinto deities changing in accord with the changing political or social roles of women may be found in the enshrinement of Himegami at Kasuga Taisha in 859. She had previously shared a shrine (*shaden* 社殿) with a male deity, but with the growing power of the Fujiwara clan whose political strength depended largely on the consorts they provided the emperor, she was given her own shrine.

³⁸ Although of course weaving was also an activity linked to women, and water, as a "yin" element was symbolically related to women.

³⁹ Although Kōya Myōjin is shown as a courtier, as in the previous painting, in ceremonial robes and holding a sceptre, the two dogs from the legend of Kariba Myōjin that are shown in all paintings of Kōya Myōjin as a hunter are found at the bottom left of the painting.

⁴⁰ Niu family collection. Dated Meihō 6 (1709). A photograph of the document is available in *Amano no rekishi to geinō*, 2003, p. 93.

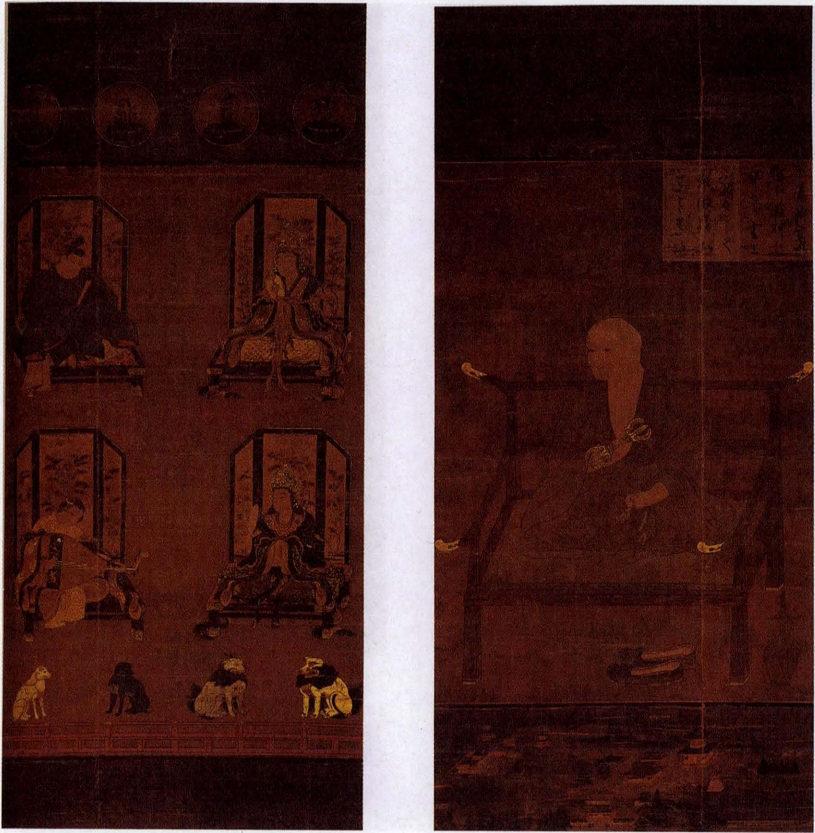


Fig. 5. *Kōbō Daishi and Shisha Myōjin*, Nanbokuchō period. Kongōbuji, Wakayama. Colors on silk, Right: 128.3 x 58.6 cm.; Left: 128.2 x 58.7cm.

deity is depicted in an active pose completely different from her usual sitting position. She is standing up on a floating cloud, recalling Taoist deities of Southern Song (1127-1279) and Yuan dynasty (1280-1368) paintings or, closer to home, a bodhisattva in a *Raigō-zu*.⁴¹ The latter similarity gives her (and the three other deities) an aura of salvatory

⁴¹ Paintings related to Japanese Pure Land Buddhism depicting Amida, often with a retinue of bodhisattvas, descending on a cloud to welcome the dying to the Western Paradise.

power. Like a *Raigō-zu* bodhisattva, she has left her heavenly abode and is heading into human territory to help people, a perfect example of a guardian god of the *shinkoku* 神国, a country protected by the kami. The resemblance suggests, as Kuroda has stressed, that the *shinkoku* concept was influenced by Buddhist teachings.⁴² The Kūkai image is conspicuously absent from this type of picture, emphasizing the independent roles played by the kami.

Finally, a reliquary shrine dating from the Nanbokuchō period (1336-1392) shows Niutsuhime painted on the inside of one of the doors (Figure 7). The shrine is reversible, and one side shows the relics inside a flaming jewel with Kūkai and Shōtoku Taishi (聖徳太子) to either side. On the other, Niutsuhime is shown in an, as far as I am aware, unique combination, with Hachiman 八幡 and Aizen Myōō. The context of her image is also unique. Although the Kasuga deity image was often employed on reliquary shrines during late Kamakura and Muromachi, it was still very unusual at this time for non-Buddhist deities to appear in connection to Buddha relic worship. By this time the *honji suijaku* concept and mandalas illustrating it were fully developed and theories that posited the opposite—that buddhas were traces or manifestations of the native deities—were starting to be formulated. The object on which Niutsuhime is depicted is important here: relics were considered to be almost constitutive of regalia and were symbolically central to a ruler's authority.⁴³



Fig. 6. *Shishā Departing to Battle the Invading Mongols*, Edo period (ca. 18th century). Kongōbuji, Wakayama. Colors on silk, 126.3 × 76.7 cm.

⁴² Kuroda 1996, pp. 353-85.

Placed inside an object they were believed to invest it with power, and there are countless Buddhist sculptures in Japan that have relics inside them. Evidently this power could be used in rituals and was, in many and varied ways: to legitimate a ruler's authority, to make rain, to ensure safe childbirth, to win love, and to drive away an enemy.⁴⁴ This reliquary was obviously a personal object of worship, as indicated by its unusually small size. Her status as a war deity likely explains Niutsuhime's appearance on the shrine, especially as she is paired with Hachiman. Also, Hachiman's oracle blessing had been seen

as vital to the legitimacy of the emperor in the past and his image here might indicate this role. Because she was identified with Wakahirume, Niutushime's connection to the imperial line was reaffirmed at this time and so in this sense her portrayed relationship with Hachiman seems appropriate. In terms of these legitimating functions it is possible the reliquary had a connection to one of the two rival emperors of the time. Go-Daigo Tennō 後醍醐天皇 (1288-1339) was particularly active in relic worship: he considered relics to be spiritual treasures of the realm and protectors of the imperial family. We know, too, that relics he received between 1324 and 1333 were required for a secret ritual for subduing his military enemies.⁴⁵ It should be noted, too, that Niutsuhime's *sanmaya*



Fig. 7. Shrine with Reliquary and Ornamentation of a Flaming Wish Granting Jewel, Nanbokuchō period. Private collection. Black-lacquered wood with polychromy, gilt-bronze, and rock crystal, H. 14.8 cm.

⁴³ See, for instance, Abe 1989; Hosokawa 1988; Ruppert, 2000; and Faure 2004.

⁴⁴ Goepper 1993.

⁴⁵ Ruppert 2002, p.25.

symbolic form is a jeweled pagoda reliquary—Kōya Myōjin's was also a pagoda, pointing to the deities' importance in Shingon-related Buddha relic worship, an importance heightened by the fact they are manifestations of Dainichi Nyorai, central to the Shingon system of belief.

The small size of the reliquary also reflects a growing sense of familiarity between deity and human which is apparent in such texts as *honjimonō* 本地物⁴⁶ as well as in contemporary depictions of Niutsuhime. A Nanbokuchō period painting⁴⁷ shows her facing and making direct eye contact with the viewer. She much resembles other Nanbokuchō and Muromachi period depictions of the female deity Benzaiten 弁才天, here suggesting that a “type” was being employed for images of female deities. The relegation of the hunters' dogs—which derive from pictures of Kariba Myōjin, the hunter whom Kūkai met on Kōya—to outside the sacred space, indicates, like the viewer's direct eye contact, a greater closeness than before with the world of humans, an availability to their needs from the mundane to the military. The very small size of the reliquary shrine—just under fifteen centimetres high—is a formal expression of this: it was a personal, portable ritual object and its size is reflective of the development away from grand, sponsored rituals to rituals in individual, everyday life that included both Buddhist figures and native kami.

Generally speaking, it may be said that the representations of the kami are not intended to preserve fixed meanings but rather reflect the ways that the kami were perceived at various times and in various contexts. This flexibility is clearly indicated by the fact that a wooden plaque, a very plain and undecorated object, could stand for her, indeed *was* her, in that it was the repository for her *mitama* 御霊 (spirit). Incidentally, she is here too represented with Hachiman as she is on the shrine.

As I have mentioned, and as is clear from the images I have introduced, the depictions of Niutsuhime do not include any references to her

⁴⁶ Muromachi to Edo period narrative texts that developed with the influence of *honji suijaku* thought and usually related the origins of temples and shrines or gave explanations of Buddhist and Shinto deities.

⁴⁷ *Niu Myōjin*, 14th century, The Honolulu Academy of Arts, Hawaii.

functions as a deity of agriculture, cinnabar, rain, or weaving (except in the wider sense that rain and weaving are linked to women). She became fully incorporated into Shingon Buddhism at Mt. Kōya. However, the mineral with which she was linked may have had significance in terms of her medieval role when Japan regarded itself as a realm protected by the gods, especially from invasions, a *shinkoku*.

The cinnabar connected to Niu was not used as vermilion pigment (the pigment derived from cinnabar) for decorative painting before the sixth century and the introduction of Buddhism.⁴⁸ In general, red oxide of iron was used to produce the red pigment such as is found in tumuli wall painting. However, there are some examples of objects that have been coated in mercurial vermilion. This indicates that pigments of the same color were used for different purposes according to the mineral from which they derived. Mercury and cinnabar would have been used perhaps primarily for ritual purposes, for their magical, protective powers, as in the enemy-repelling rituals performed by Jinmu and Jingu previously mentioned. Interestingly, the third-century Wei Kingdom chronicle's description of Yamatai, *Account of the Wa People* (*Gishi wajin den* 魏志倭人伝), reveals that Japan exported cinnabar to China as tributary gifts and it was also prized there, but presumably used a different way—for wall painting. Another description of the use of cinnabar in Yamatai is found in the same chronicle. It relates that the people colored part of their bodies red using a mineral like cinnabar or red oxide of lead just as the people in China used white face powder as a cosmetic.

There may be a conceptual link between cinnabar and the military role in which Niutsuhime was later cast. Among the very little extant documentation concerning the so-called “heretical” Tachikawa Shingon sect (*Tachikawa ryū* 立川流), active and connected to the imperial house during the Nanbokuchō period, there is material on a ritual connected to it which uses cinnabar as an agent that like blood could imbue an object with life force.⁴⁹ It is quite easy to see how the connection with life-blood was made; “on gloomy or rainy days,” an eleventh century Chi-

⁴⁸ Kuchitsu 2006.

⁴⁹ Sanford 1991, p. 12.

⁵⁰ Su Sung, 1021, quoted in Bancroft 1984, p. 56.

nese writer reports, “humidity like a red juice forms on the broken surfaces [of cinnabar crystals].” He also relates that “it is found in association with a kind of white stone on which it grows.”⁵⁰ He probably meant dolomite. This color combination as a signifier came to play a very important role in Tachikawa metaphysics and the red was explicitly linked to the *yin* or feminine element.⁵¹

At the time the reliquary shrine was produced, Niutsuhime was linked less to cinnabar and mercury and primarily to martial prowess. It might be said that the two are closely related, however, if we consider the specific ritual uses concerning the repelling of enemies to which cinnabar was legendarily put by sovereigns of old. She was also identified once more during the late Kamakura period with Wakahirume, the younger sister, or emanation, of Amaterasu. The connections—with Wakahirume, with cinnabar, and with war—are not conceptually far apart because all served to tie Kōya-san closely to the imperial family and to strengthen the idea that Japan was a realm protected by the kami, a *shinkoku*.

My original inquiry concerned the lack of attributes or motifs that one might expect to find in the depictions of this deity to illustrate the diverse functions for which she was worshipped. The absence of such signs suggests that the function of kami was not fixed and could change according to people’s needs. But it also points up certain ideas about representations of sacredness, the relationship between deity and image. Similarly, the *Kongōkai* 金剛界 (Diamond World) and *Taijōkai* mandalas used in Shingon ritual practices do not appear to serve any purpose as visualization tools, that is, Sharf argues, there is no correlation between the liturgical content of ritual and the iconographic content of mandala used in it.⁵² If indications of functions are absent, what are the conventions that govern depictions of Niutsuhime? In the paintings I have shown, she is personified and dressed in courtly robes of either T’ang or Japanese style.

Kami were first personified during the Nara period when *shaden* 社

⁵¹ The “Theory of Red and White Drops” (*shakubyaku niteki* 赤白二滴) was one of the Tachikawa sect’s central ideas. See Goepper 1993, p.113.

⁵² Sharf 2001, p. 177.

殿 were built and the kami enshrined. These buildings became necessary as protective structures when solid and often precious objects such as mirrors, swords, or jewels began to be used as *shintai*. During the Heian period these *shaden* came to be considered the permanent residences of the kami. Prior to this kami would be solicited into a structure made for ritual purposes that was later dismantled. The kami then departed to return to its own locality. Despite the settled status that developed in the Heian period, kami continued up to the present day to be considered mobile. For example, two deities were invited, that is, “relocated,” to Niutsuhime shrine in the thirteenth century. Kami are also moved around during special ceremonies or events at shrines. It is relevant that kami were not depicted until the introduction of Buddhism and were much influenced by Buddhist images. Their personification also coincided with their being allotted permanent residences at shrines. Faces of deities were occasionally not depicted in art even if their bodies were, as I have mentioned, and this perhaps reflects an uneasiness with the humanization of the transcendent.

The courtly apparel of the deities may be related to the fact that Buddhism of the period was closely connected to the aristocracy. From the late Heian period onwards we see the growth of other religious groups that appealed to the lower classes and to women, making salvation an option for all, not only the moneyed or male, or those who could afford extravagant rituals and donations. However, Mt. Kōya, for example, depended on connections with those in power and so it might be supposed that depictions of kami related to Kōya ought to reflect and appeal to its most important patrons and clients. But high status reflected in the depiction of a deity may be an attempt, too, to contain its powers. The conferral of court rank to kami had become widespread from the eighth century. The establishment of this system of ranks was part of the *ritsuryō* 律令 state system of the mid-seventh century and its application to kami was an attempt to humanize them. Although when depiction began it was heavily influenced by the style of Buddhist sculpture, Shinto figures developed their own style. They were clearly modeled on court ladies and men,⁵³ and as such are shown in an attitude of service to the

⁵³ They were also sometimes shown as monks.

realm. Although there are exceptions, generally they became smaller in size over time (they are usually less than life-size), are shown in a kneeling position, and demonstrate passivity and inaction, sometimes with downcast eyes. This is especially true of images of female deities. They were also seen to be “in service” to Buddhism, as indicated by the inscription on the image of Niutsuhime as a Heian court lady and by the smaller size of the two deities in comparison to Kūkai. Likewise the spread of Buddhism often involved control of the shrines, and monks of the early Heian period considered the native deities to be in need of salvation.⁵⁴

The high status accorded to the kami in rank and image might be considered a way of controlling their power or, in the political sense, the way in which the government could incorporate systems of belief and cultic practices. Essentially, their representations as courtiers shows them as being in roles of service to the realm. The Taika reform instituted the Jingikan 神祇官, the Bureau of Worship, to deal with ritual practice while the Dajōkan 太政官, the Bureau of State Affairs, was responsible for policy-making. The Jingikan was above the Dajōkan because the realm of the invisible, having preceded, it was believed, the manifestation of visual forms, was considered superior to that of the visible. However, in practice, the members of the Jingikan all had lower ranks than those of the Dajōkan—and so in fact the Bureau of State Affairs was above that of Worship.⁵⁵

The same contradiction may be found in the way kami were visually portrayed. On the one hand their court rank and high status, which was clearly portrayed in their robes, accessories, and hairstyles, signified privilege; on the other it was, it could be supposed, a form of control or pacification. Although the kami of people who have died and the kami of nature should be distinguished, we can find instances throughout Japanese history in which both are pacified. The troublesome spirit of a person who died in sad or painful circumstances is deified and worshipped in order to appease it and restore peace to the realm. Well-known examples are the kami of Sugawara no Michizane 菅原道真 (845-903) and Go-

⁵⁴ Grapard 2002, pp. 226-27.

⁵⁵ Grapard 2000, p. 77.

Daigo Tennō. Also, many cases of violent kami (*arakami* 荒神) calmed through enshrinement are recorded in the *Fudoki*. In these cases, status is accorded as a means of appeasement and control by humans over destructive forces. Motoori Norinaga remarked,

all...things whatsoever which deserve to be dreaded and revered for the extraordinary and pre-eminent powers they possess, are called kami. They need not be eminent for surpassing nobleness...or serviceableness alone. Malignant and uncanny beings are also called *kami*, if only they are the objects of general dread.⁵⁶

Further, cases may be observed of deities that came to be venerated as a way of incorporating and in a sense, pacifying, the group to whom the deity was originally of importance. Niutsuhime is one such example. She had been the deity, it is thought, of a mercury mining clan at Kōya and was “adopted” as the guardian mountain deity when Kūkai established Kongōbuji. In legend, he also asks the deity of Higashiyama Inari shrine to be guardian of Tōji, which one scholar states was “the method Kūkai utilized in overcoming the political opposition of the Inari priests.”⁵⁷ Such cooperation between different centers of spiritual activity, political or otherwise—seen on a larger scale between Buddhism and Shinto—are what lie behind such Japanese phenomena as *shinbutsu shūgō* 神仏習合 and *honji suijaku*. Our definition of worship itself is one which affects our understanding of images of deities. The Oxford English Dictionary defines “worship” as “homage or reverence paid to a deity... adoration or devotion comparable to religious homage... worthiness, merit; recognition given or due to these.”⁵⁸ Yet many incidents in Japanese history indicate that worship was often not an honor given as a reward but as a measure of control and coercion. Personification and high status bring kami into the human realm where they can be more effectively managed. More generally, on representations of divinity, it has

⁵⁶ Quoted in Nakamura 1998, p. 35.

⁵⁷ Matsunaga 1969, p.193.

⁵⁸ *The Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, 1990.

⁵⁹ Freedberg 1989, p. 65.

been remarked that:

When... the object takes human form, then ... the unknowable becomes familiar and knowable; and what is familiarly known cannot be invested with powers that are proper to the sphere of transcendence.⁵⁹

While personification and the status reflected by courtly robes allow kami to, in a sense, be part of society, instances of the concealment of certain images, lack of a face, and so on, might be considered a kind of compensation for the loss of "aura." But I would like to add that the way in which many sacred objects and images were seen to be capable of animation, mobility, and transformation must also have influenced such practices. They were essentially kept "unfixed" and unstable and one reason for—or else result of—this was that they could respond to people's different needs at different times.

My study of this subject has always been accompanied by consciousness of my standpoint as a foreigner and the hazards of imposing preconceived notions on images and practices of another culture: the basic assumption that an image should be visible was called into question. I had, too, to consider the meanings of worship in relation to an image that "stands for" a sacred presence and also the function of the image itself. These issues I hope to investigate further.

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