

THE CATALPA BOW

A Study in Shamanistic
Practices in Japan

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Exorcism

We have now arrived at the last stage of our investigation, the rituals whereby the powers of both the ascetic and the medium are used to deal with the lower spiritual entities which cause the symptoms of demoniacal possession. Already we have observed two or three examples of the manner in which a professional ascetic healer, alone and unaided, casts out the foxes and ghosts which cause possession. We now examine those older methods of exorcism whereby the exorcist does not confront the sufferer directly, but forces the spirit to transfer itself into the body of a medium, through whose mouth it must name itself and hold dialogue with him. Once more, therefore, we are concerned with the ritual of *yorigitō*, but it is directed now not towards prayer and petition to a superior spiritual being, but to the banishment and restitution of an inferior one.

We mentioned in a previous chapter that the use of a medium as a mere passive vehicle, a virtual zombie through whose mouth the spirit may speak, can be traced back to the ninth century when the doctrines and spells of esoteric Buddhism were first brought to Japan from China. We have seen too that the Abisha ritual prescribed the use of unblemished children for this purpose; bathed, dressed, anointed, purified and censed, they would tell one everything one wished to know of hidden and future things.

The use of children, untrained girls and even the elegant ladies of the court for this extraordinary purpose is recorded in many places in the literature of the Heian period. More often than as organs of prophesy, however, such people are found serving as mediums for the ascetic healers of the time; as vessels into whom the malignant spirit could be transferred from the body of the patient, and through whom it could be brought to subjection.

The ascetic exorcist at this time was usually either a priest of the Tendai or Shingon sect, or one of the *yamabushi* or *genja* who had accomplished noteworthy penances and

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austerities in the hills. Such people were often described as wild, uncouth and fierce—'yamabushi of the most repulsive and ferocious aspect' are recorded as summoned to the bedside of Kashiwagi in the 36th chapter of the *Genji Monogatari*.¹ The elegant priest described by Sei Shōnagon in her *Pillow Book*, compiled at the end of the tenth century, is exceptional. This vivid vignette of an exorcism shows us exactly what use was made of the medium at this time.

We see a house surrounded by trees and opening on to a garden. Inside, invisible in an inner room, lies someone sorely afflicted by an evil possession. A Buddhist priest in an extremely elegant dark brown robe, a clove-dyed fan in his hand, sits intoning the *Senju Darani* or Spell of the Thousand-handed Kannon. The medium is 'a rather heavily built girl with a good head of hair'. Eventually the power of the spell forces the spirit to leave the patient and enter into the girl, who accordingly wails, screams and falls prostrate on the floor in such a manner that her clothing is embarrassingly disordered. The patient is soon pronounced to be better, the medium regains consciousness, and the priest, before whom the household prostrates itself in awe, takes an urbane leave promising to come again soon.²

Another description of an exorcism occurs in the diary of Murasaki Shikibu, the celebrated writer of the *Genji Monogatari*. The Empress Akiko lies in labour so difficult and painful that a case of possession is suspected. Not one but many exorcists, Buddhist abbots and clerics, wild mountain ascetics specially brought down from their retreats in the hills, were shouting spells at the tops of their voices. Several court ladies had offered their services as mediums, and each one lay behind a screen with an exorcist allotted to her. The night having passed in a frightful hubbub of chanting, eventually towards morning the Empress was safely delivered of a son. The screams of the spirits were most uncanny to hear, wrote Murasaki, and one was so strong that it actually threw one of the exorcising priests to the ground. Yet none of the ladies acting as medium were molested in any way, and all were lamenting that their services had not proved more effective.³

Murasaki's account, in the second *Wakana* chapter of

Genji, of the treatment given to the sick lady Murasaki by a child medium is probably as authentic as the description in her diary. After a long struggle the spirit molesting the lady was transferred by the spells and fire rituals of the priests into the body of a small boy. The boy raved and raged, the hair on his head stood upright, great tears trickled down his cheeks, but through his mouth there was eventually spoken a terrifyingly comprehensible message which enabled them at once to identify the spirit who was causing the trouble.⁴

Before we proceed to describe how this method of exorcism has still survived to the present day in the practice of the Nichiren sect of Buddhism, let us first review a little more consistently than we have so far done the varied symptoms subsumed under the term 'possession'. Four different kinds seem to me to be usefully distinguished in Japan.

First, we have those symptoms where the body alone is affected. Aches, mysterious pains, lumbago, hacking coughs, fainting fits, loss of appetite, inexplicable fevers, all these are even now commonly laid at the door of spiritual agencies. Most of the cases recorded in Heian literature, moreover, seem to have been of this type. Depression, the enfeebled and morbid condition which apparently overtook so many of the elegant inhabitants of the capital, the discomforts of pregnancy and the difficulties of childbirth, were frequently attributed to the work of some angry or resentful spirit.

Secondly, there are symptoms which appear to signify mental imbalance but which do not bring about any trance or dissociation. Hallucinations, both visual and auditory, are a case in point. The patient complains of voices speaking in her ear, but remains nevertheless rooted in her own personality.

Thirdly, we have symptoms of altered personality, of mental states which could be described as trance, but in which no intruding entity speaks through the patient's mouth. A distressing report in the journal *Minzoku to Rekishi* of 1922 describes a case of multiple possession on just these lines. First the trusty servant, then the wife, then the eldest daughter of the family fell victim to the malady, which was unhesitatingly attributed to a fox. In each case the facial expression changed, with eyes upturned and mouth pouting

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into a snout. All three victims ate enormously, grabbing the food with their hands and stuffing it into their mouths. All three lost all memory, all sense of personal cleanliness and all power of speech. All exorcism was in vain and the family was utterly ruined.⁵

Lastly, we have the symptoms which are more generally recognised as those of possession, in which another entity, with a different voice and a different personality, speaks through the patient's mouth. Such cases are in fact comparatively rare, far less frequently encountered than those in the other three categories. Still among the best-described examples are those which Dr Baelz treated in his hospital in Tokyo in the 1890s. Over the years he admitted several women suffering from fox possession, through whose mouths the fox spoke in a dry cracked voice, and in uncouth and brutal terms. He describes one case in which a violent altercation took place between the fox and its unfortunate hostess. The fox, speaking with far more wit and cleverness than could be expected from the simple-minded woman he was possessing, continued a stream of rude invective for several minutes. Now and then the woman in her own voice besought him to be quiet and to treat the doctors with more respect. But her admonitions were unavailing, and it was only when after ten minutes the fox became bored that the woman was able to come to herself and beg with tears for forgiveness for the outrageous conduct of the fox.⁶

We may note in passing that the Catholic Church now recognises as cases of possession only those corresponding to those in our fourth category.⁷ In the past it frequently attributed cases in the other three categories to the work of demons, but these are now considered to be explicable in terms of modern science. In Japan, however, the full range of symptoms may still be found classed as possession, and to the cure of such afflictions in Nichiren Buddhist temples today we now turn.

The Nichiren sect has long boasted a tradition of exorcist practices based on the sect's holy scripture, the Lotus Sutra.⁸ The practices are carried out principally by priests of the Nakayama branch of the sect, which has its head temple at Hokekyōji in Chiba prefecture. Here, however, the *yorigitō*

method making use of a *dairi* or medium has largely been abandoned in favour of a direct confrontation between exorcist and patient. In the temple of Hōkōji in Kanazawa, however, the older method still survives.

Like other ascetics in Japan, the Nichiren priests have to undergo a preliminary period of austerities before they are believed to be endued with the necessary power to deal with inferior spirits. For them, however, the regime is a particularly excruciating one. Known as the hundred days *aragyō* or rough austerities, it is carried out every winter either on the summit of Mt Minobu, the mountain not far from Fuji to which Nichiren retired in his old age, or in a secluded temple in the precincts of the Hokekyōji in Chiba prefecture.

As related to me by Hotta Ryūshō Shōnin, the incumbent of the Kanazawa temple, the hundred days *aragyō* start on November 1st and continue throughout the coldest days of the winter until well into the following February. The regime is as follows. The days starts at 3 a.m. with a bout of cold water *mizugori*. The exercitant priests, wearing only a loincloth, tip over their heads tub after tub of cold water. This exercise is repeated every three hours until 9 p.m., making in all seven times a day. Only two meals a day are allowed, and those consist only of thin rice gruel. The rest of the time is entirely taken up with the chanting of the Lotus Sutra and with practice in the use of the *bokken* or magic castanets. This peculiar instrument, a flat piece of wood with a ball attached, makes a sharp resonant click held to have a powerful effect on spiritual beings.

The last spell of Lotus chanting ends at 11 p.m., so that four hours sleep a night is all that is allowed to the exercising priests. Shaving and cutting the hair are prohibited throughout the hundred days, so that those who endure the course emerge on the last day with long hair and straggling beards. From the commemorative photograph which the Shōnin showed me I could see that his hair had gone prematurely white with the strain of the penances. And indeed, what with the appalling cold, the reduced diet, the lack of sleep and the extreme pain caused by the correct straight-armed manipulation of the *bokken*, the Nichiren regime is one of the most taxing and exhausting still to be found in Japan.

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The Shōnin had undergone the treatment no less than five times on the summit of Mt Minobu, and was hence revered throughout the district for his powers. In his temple in Kanazawa a service of exorcism was held every morning throughout the year, which on average a dozen patients would attend, suffering from a variety of symptoms which they had reason to lay at the door of some spiritual agency.

When I visited the temple in the summer of 1967 the medium, who had served every day in this capacity for a number of years, was the Shōnin's mother. During the exorcism which I witnessed she did heavy duty, for in that one morning a total of one fox, three snakes, one jealous woman, one frantic man and one cat were 'called up' to speak through her mouth.

The ritual started at 9.30 in the morning with a dozen patients, mostly women, sitting at the back of the hall banging on drums until the Shōnin, clad in immaculate white, entered and took up his seat in front of the altar. For some minutes he recited passages from the Lotus Sutra in a nasal voice, rapping sharply meanwhile on the shelf in front of him with a wooden mallet.

Next there entered the medium, who knelt at the foot of the dais on which he was sitting. He then turned to face the room with a rosary in his hand.

In the procedure which followed the cases fell into three different and distinct kinds.

First, the Shōnin turned to a pile of papers lying next to him, on which were written problems submitted by patients and petitioners in the congregation. These, one by one, the Shōnin read aloud, and at once, in a firm and unhesitating voice, the medium provided an answer.

Most of the questions concerned sickness. My mother is suffering from a terrible pain in her back; what is causing it? My old father has awful stomach cramps in the middle of the night; what is causing them? I have a persistent voice talking in my ear and saying dreadful things; what is it?

A reply came immediately from the medium. Your mother simply has an attack of lumbago caused by sitting in a draught; her pain is not due to possession of any kind and she will soon recover if you keep her warm and quiet. Your

father's cramps are caused by an unhappy ancestral ghost; he should come into the temple and receive the proper treatment. The voice speaking in your ear is that of a fox; you must come into the temple in order to get rid of it.

Other questions concerned missing persons and things. Here is an example. A few days ago my husband went to climb a certain mountain and has not yet come back. What has become of him? The answer came: you are afraid that he has met with an accident. There has been no accident. Your husband climbed the mountain in order to commit suicide. You will find his body about 500 metres from the summit on the east side.

The being who was giving those authoritative answers through the medium, I was afterwards informed, was Kumaō Daimyōjin, the guardian deity of the temple. It was he who determined the first step of every exorcism, the identification of the molesting spirit. It was he who pronounced whether the patient's trouble was spiritual in origin or not, and hence whether she needed to come into the temple to be cured, or was simply overtired and needed a rest. It was he too who distinguished the nature of the possessing spirit, and pronounced it to be a fox, snake or neglected ghost.

In this procedure, therefore, no need arose to force the spirit to name itself and state the reasons for its conduct, preliminaries which we shall find to be essential in the other, more direct method of Nichiren exorcism.

These written questions once disposed of, the Shōnin moved on to the second and most difficult stage of the proceedings. These were the cases of possession called and questioned for the first time. At this early stage the spirit required the full treatment known in the Nichiren sect as *zaishō-shōmetsu*, or the annihilation of sin-hindrances.

The Shōnin started by reading out the name and age of the patient. Then he recited in nasal tones a succession of passages from the Lotus Sutra and a good many repetitions of the *daimoku* or sacred formula, at the same time striking sparks from a flint and making rapid passes and sharp clicks on the *bokken*. These were all devices, I was told, calculated to force the spirit to leave the body of the patient at the back

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of the hall and to enter that of the medium, through whose mouth alone it could speak and be brought to submission.

The first case to come up was a male fox. It spoke through the medium's mouth in strong uncouth tones. As she gave utterance to these words the old lady crouched down on the floor with her hands clenched together in front of her, a position which I gathered was a common one for foxes to adopt, the clenched hands representing paws. A short dialogue took place between the Shōnin and the fox, in which the latter seemed chiefly to be begging for forgiveness, uttering over and over again the words, '*Kannin shite hoshii!*' The Shōnin then resumed his recitation of the sacred formula, the fox joining in in a singsong voice.

The next case to come up was the spirit of a dead man. The medium as she transmitted his utterances manifested extraordinary and exhausting emotion. She sobbed and wept, leaning forward so that long streams of saliva and mucus dangled from her nose and mouth. It was impossible for me to understand the low, choking gasps in which she spoke, and even the Shōnin had to bend forward several times in order to hear properly. But afterwards I was told that the patient, one of the women sitting at the back of the hall, was possessed by the spirit of her dead husband. Tormented with anxiety about the welfare of his family, whom he had left without adequate provision and who were suffering from poverty and neglect, he had possessed his widow in order to draw attention to his feelings.

Throughout the dialogue the Shōnin adopted a sympathetic and reassuring attitude. Poised on his dais above the medium, he nodded and smiled compassionately, now and then repeating the medium's words as though to make sure he had understood them properly. At the end of the colloquy the spirit's anxiety's seemed allayed, for it too began to sob for forgiveness. The usual sparks, magic passes of the *bokken* and recitations of the sacred formula ended the calling.

Next there was a jealous woman worrying about the welfare of her children. She had possessed a short dumpy woman who had apparently been charged to look after them. Again the medium flopped forward, sobbing out broken words in praise of the sutra and begging for forgiveness.

In this case the patient came forward from the back of the hall to ask questions of the spirit. This was permitted provided she asked the questions through the Shōnin, who alone could phrase them to the spirit in the right way.

With these three cases the second and most exhausting stage of the morning's proceedings were concluded. The third stage, comprising cases called for the second, third or fourth time, was much less taxing. Three snakes and one cat appeared in this category, one after the other in rapid succession. All four were brief and simple. There was no dialogue, no sobbing for forgiveness. The medium scarcely opened her mouth while the Shōnin performed his recitations. After the cathartic emotion of the first calling, I was told, the spirit needed to be called several more times in order to listen to the holy reading of the Lotus Sutra before it could be properly laid to rest.

The morning's session ended at about eleven o'clock with more drumming and rapping and reciting, the medium quietly and without ceremony leaving the hall after wiping her face.

Later in the morning this remarkable and courteous lady told me her story. Soon after her marriage she had fallen ill with tuberculosis of the spine. For four months she lay in hospital and all hope of her recovery had been abandoned. Someone then advised her as a last resort to visit the temple. She was conveyed there, and the cause of her trouble quickly discovered to be possession by a remote ancestor who had been a riding master in the service of a certain feudal lord. He had been drowned while trying to ford a flooded river on his horse, and had since been unable to achieve rest. At once the correct treatment of exorcism was started, and within a week she was well again.

Her marriage, however, was not a happy one. Her husband kept in the house no less than three concubines, who between them produced several children. She herself bore six children, but when it came to dividing the property the concubines' children were treated on a par with her own. When she protested she was driven out of the house. Taking with her her six children and her mother she took refuge in the temple. The Shōnin who was the incumbent of the

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temple at the time had just lost his wife, so before very long she married him. The present incumbent, Ryūshō Shōnin, was her son by this second husband.

Many mediums, she knew, remembered nothing of what they said in their trance state, but she remembered everything. She remembered the rude and uncouth words the fox had uttered through her mouth that morning. She remembered the tears running down her chin and the streams of saliva dripping from her mouth. Sometimes she 'received' the spirit too strongly and fell ill. But on the whole, as her long service in the temple attested, her health was remarkably good.

The ancient method of exorcism just described stands in interesting contrast with the techniques now employed by the Nakayama branch of the Nichiren sect, and which I witnessed on several occasions in 1963 in the temple of Barakisan Myōgyōji in Chiba prefecture.

In this temple they abandoned the use of the medium about a century ago, on the score that the spirit often refused to be transferred from the body of the patient so that no communication with it could take place. Their present more reliable method, whereby the exorcising priest directly confronts the patient, had been originally devised by Nichijun Shōnin, a priest celebrated during the last century for his remarkable powers.

The Myōgyōji temple differs from the one in Kanazawa in so far as the patients if they so wish are able to board in the temple for days or even weeks until they are completely cured. A large dormitory wing in the precincts is capable of accommodating several dozen people, and includes a large room for the daily recitation practice.

An important feature of the Myōgyōji method is that the patient herself must make strenuous efforts to cooperate with the exorcist. This she does by reciting, virtually all day long with only short intervals for rest, meals and the twice-daily services, the powerful formula *Nammyōhō rengekyō*, known as the *daimoku* and particularly venerated by the Nichiren sect. Indeed, no sooner had I walked through the gate of the temple than I could hear, from a distant wing, the sounds of a big drum beating and a chorus of voices repeating over and