

SATŌ Hiroo

## Vengeful Spirits, Divine Punishment, and Natural Disasters

### Catastrophe and Religion in Japan

Without scientific knowledge, the people of premodern societies in Japan tried to understand natural disasters through their association with transcendent beings (*kami*). In ancient Japan, natural disasters were interpreted as messages, that is, vengeful curses, from the *kami*. With the establishment of a systematic cosmology during the middle ages, the causes of catastrophes were explained in terms of the law of cause and effect according to which punishment and salvation were delivered by the *kami*. With the onset of the early modern period, the sense of reality inherent in the perceptions of fundamental beings declined, and the salvation of the dead could no longer be entrusted to the other-worldly *kami*. People then came to terms with catastrophes as natural disasters that must be faced. Rituals and customs, carried out over long periods, were put in place to raise the dead to the status of ancestral spirits. In addition to a shift from the traditional world in which *kami*, the living, and the dead coexisted, to a shutting out of the latter group, the process of “modernization” brought with it a restructuring of society around the exclusive rights and interests of human beings. The Great East Japan Earthquake has been an opportunity to reconsider the path ahead, and to reconsider responses to catastrophe which display the modern tendency to focus on the concerns of the living to the exclusion of those of the dead.

KEYWORDS: natural disasters—catastrophe—vengeance—the Great East Japan Earthquake—modernization

SATŌ Hiroo is a professor in the history of Japanese thought, Graduate School of Arts and Letters, Tohoku University.

ON 11 MARCH 2011 an extensive area stretching from the Kanto to the Tohoku regions was struck by a strong earthquake. This was the Great East Japan Earthquake. Within minutes, an enormous tsunami, frequently described as “unprecedented” and that came on the heels of intense tremors, took the lives of close to twenty thousand people. This natural disaster has had a great impact on the Japanese people in various ways, but particularly important among these is the fact that it made modern Japanese once more aware of the closeness of death.

There cannot be too many people living in the disaster zone who do not have relatives or friends affected by the catastrophe, including myself. Many, having barely escaped themselves, had to witness the horrific sight of seeing people they knew being swallowed by the waves. A majority of Japanese saw the images of people, cars, and houses swept away by the tsunami in the media. Many witnessed death from close up.

It goes without saying that death is a reality for everyone. There is no exception. It is not only us who are branded with the fate of death. For one person to live, the death of many living beings is unavoidable. Humans carry with them the shadows of uncounted deaths and are themselves fated to incessantly march towards the final destination of death.

However, is there actually any opportunity in modern Japan to realize this state of affairs? In their everyday lives, most people rarely have to see somebody who is dying. It is almost inconceivable to see the emaciated figure of a corpse. It is also difficult to imagine the forms of once living cows, pigs, or chickens based on the dismembered and packaged meat filling supermarket shelves. Death, wrapped tightly in a shroud and scrupulously hidden from view, is removed from everyday life. Even to announce aloud that everyone has to die is regarded as taboo. As if one could escape death by simply not talking about it, contemporary Japanese have lowered their voices and averted their gaze from death.

It is because contemporary society has taken this form that the Great East Japan Earthquake, which made us aware of the reality of death, could strike such strong disquiet into our hearts and minds.

\* This article is translated from the original Japanese that appeared in *Shūkyō Kenkyū* 宗教研究 86(2), 2012, 133–56.

*Disaster as Fate*

With one stroke, the disaster of 11 March unleashed the questions surrounding death, which had been sealed up for so long by people in modern Japan. Whether people were directly affected by the disaster or exposed to images of it, all were overwhelmed by that horrifying black wave surging forward and swallowing everything in its path. Through this event, we learned the hard way that however one tries to avoid it, it is impossible to escape an undeserved death.

I was on my way to the Shinkansen station in Sendai when the disaster struck. If I had chosen a plane for transportation, I would have been hit by the tsunami on a road close to the airport, in a parking lot, or inside the airport terminal. A slight coincidence or whim would have changed my life. It must have been the same for other people as well.

The disaster of 2011 cost the lives of many who carried no personal responsibility for the catastrophe, but this was not the first time the Japanese people have experienced wanton mass death. We had already experienced the Great Hanshin Earthquake of 1995, and if we go back even further, to the first half of the twentieth century, there was a time when all of Japan was utterly devastated. Towards the end of World War II, the sight of the burnt bodies of bombing victims littering roadsides was commonplace, regardless of their degree of complicity in the war, their age, or gender.

Apart from tsunamis, the Japanese islands have continuously been ravaged by disasters that are beyond human control. Most representative of these are famines. Famines costing the lives of people continued until the beginning of the Showa era (the late 1920s). The struggle with famine was a burden that the Tohoku region in particular had to carry.<sup>1</sup>

Famines occurred in succession. People exerted themselves in order to prepare for their onslaught. They also prepared for years in which there was a poor harvest. However, in the case of a prolonged famine such as the so-called Four Great Famines of the Edo period that occurred once every few decades, there was not much that could be done.

Famines in the Tohoku region were caused by cold weather damage to crops. At the time of the great famine of the Tenmei era in the second half of the eighteenth century, the famine was further exacerbated by the outbreak of Mount Asama. Smoke covered the sky and ash rained down like snow. The effects of the cold wave and the volcanic smoke interacted, leading to a record-breaking cold summer. The harvest was dramatically reduced, resulting in many famine victims in northern Tohoku. In the Hachinohe domain, it is estimated that the population was halved in just a few years (HACHINOHE SHI 1976). In the fifth

1. Regarding famines in the Edo period, see KIKUCHI (1997).

year of the Tenmei era (1785), Sugae Masumi (1754–1829), who visited Tsugaru, described the marks left by the famine: “Arriving at the village, like patches of leftover snow, white human bones were strewn all throughout the grass, or piled up in heaps” (from “Sotogahamakaze,” SUGAE 1971).

People had to struggle hard just to survive. Whatever could be eaten, from wild grasses to the bark of trees, was completely consumed. The first to be sacrificed were household animals. Dogs and cats were turned into food. There were even cases in which people were forced to feed on human flesh.

On the other hand, in order to reduce the number of mouths to feed, the culling of the weak was practiced. All across eastern Japan, for example in places such as Shinshū or Tōno in Iwate Prefecture, there are legends about abandoning old people (*ubasute*), although their veracity has not been established. However, it is certain that this was something that was also actually practiced in some instances. For instance, there was the custom of infanticide known as the “culling of seedlings” (*mabiki*). As YANAGITA Kunio (1875–1962) describes in his *Kokyō nanajūnen* (1971), *mabiki* was still widely practiced in eastern Japan when he was a child during the first half of the Meiji period. There are still many extant examples in places of votive tablets (*ema*), which were written in order to stop infanticide. According to Yanagita, who saw one himself, it was “a ghastly thing showing a woman with a headband wrapped around her head in bed smothering a newborn child” (YANAGITA 1971, 21). Yanagita reminisces in his book that there was a “sense of having to eradicate famine at all costs” (YANAGITA 1971, 23). This was born out of the experience of the horrors created by famine that formed the original impetus for his inquiries.

Despite the prohibition of infanticide issued by the feudal lords, *mabiki* did not disappear from the world of the commoners. Someone had to be sacrificed so that others could live. This era in which people were repeatedly forced to make the ultimate choice between two lives continued on in the Japanese isles. People carried on living in order to pass on the torch of life to the next generation, with despair carved deep into their gut, and enduring cruel tribulations.

### *The Discovery of the Kami*

Even Japan, the country with the most advanced systems for predicting earthquakes and tsunamis, was unable to avoid misery in 2011. In comparison, pre-modern society did not have any means of foretelling and avoiding the natural disasters besieging this archipelago.

However, people cannot resign themselves to merely live in constant fear of disasters that could strike at any moment. In order to come to terms with this situation, it is necessary to have a convincing interpretation for these repeated

catastrophes. Individual natural disasters cannot just be seen as random events, but by providing an interpretation rooted in the world surrounding us and explaining their occurrence as necessary, they can be incorporated into an intelligible order of things. By doing so, people are able for the first time to maybe not affirm disasters outright, but to accept the harsh realities accompanying them.

Just like other areas of the world, premodern Japanese society, with its lack of scientific knowledge, sought to interpret the occurrence of these unavoidable catastrophes in relation to transcendental entities (*kami*).

In the society of ancient Japan, where nature and the deities (*kami*) were not properly divided, natural disasters were seen as messages from the *kami* to humans. The *Kojiki*, which was completed at the beginning of the eighth century, records the case of a major epidemic during the reign of Emperor Sujin 崇神 [said to have reigned between 97 BCE and 30 BCE], which brought the people close to extinction. When Sujin, who was at a loss for a solution, prayed to the *kami*, the deity Ōmononushi no *kami* appeared to him in a dream, telling him that the epidemic had been caused by the punitive powers (*tatari*) of the deity and that the land could be pacified if the deity received worship from a person called Ōtataneko. When these instructions were followed, the epidemic subsided and people were able to return to a peaceful life (*Kojiki*, 182–84).

The *kami* inflicted not only disease onto humans. To people in ancient Japan, all phenomena occurring in this world that went beyond human understanding were caused by the doings of the *kami*. People had no choice but to unconditionally accept the will of the *kami*.

At that time, the *kami* were thought to express their will through their punitive powers known as *tatari*. Ōmononushi caused the epidemic in order to communicate to the people his wishes. While this resulted in many innocent people losing their lives, Ōmononushi did not unleash the epidemic out of mere spite. He only wanted to get the attention of people and realize his wishes.

As Orikuchi Shinobu has argued, for people in ancient times *tatari* was the manifestation of the will of a *kami* (ORIKUCHI 1995–). It was impossible to predict these manifestations of *tatari*, and until the power of *tatari* actually manifested itself and the *kami* revealed its identity, it was not possible to know which *kami* was causing the *tatari*. The content of their demands was also not possible to foresee. Thus, in ancient times, people interpreted the wanton disasters that would strike suddenly without any forewarning as being caused by the irrational character of the *kami*. Alongside simply enduring the disasters as something unavoidable, people saw in the resolution of the *tatari* another way to end them.

While the idea that disasters were caused by one-sided commands (*tatari*) from the *kami* existed throughout the ancient period, ideas concerning the cause of the *tatari* gradually shifted from *tatari* being regarded as completely

unintelligible demands to explanations focused on cause and effect. Further, alongside the establishment of the *ritsuryō* state order, responses to *tatari* became codified and systematized (SATŌ 2000, 25).

In May 863 (Jōkan 5), an epidemic that killed a large number of people and caused the court considerable consternation was determined to have been caused by “venerable spirits” (*goryō*). A Buddhist ritual was conducted at the temple Shinsen'en in Kyoto in order to quell the effects of the *tatari*. The spirits worshipped on that occasion were those of Emperor Sudō, Prince Iyo, Ioe no Iratsume (Fujiwara Yoshiko), a local supervisor [identified presumably as Fujiwara Nakanari], Tachibana Hayanari (former ambassador to China), and Funya no Miyatamaro. The spirits of these six persons were called “venerable spirits” (*goryō*), a “spirit seat” (*reiza*) was established for them, and an attempt was made to quell their anger by making offerings as well as reciting sutras and performing songs and dances (*Nihon sandai jitsuroku zenhen* 1952, 112–13).

These venerable spirits are essentially spirits of the dead. They were treated similar to the kami in that they were seen as the cause of epidemics, and this was an attempt to calm their anger (*tatari*) through offerings and the recitation of sutras. The court sought to quell rampaging diseases that had turned into major problems for society by connecting them to new deities referred to as “venerable spirits” and worshipping these entities.

Epidemics occur in all historical periods. Disease is certainly something to be feared, but diseases become even more terrifying when their cause is unknown. However dangerous a disease, if its cause can be understood, people gain a certain sense of security. During the Heian period, a specific type of deity known as “venerable spirits” was regarded as the cause of disease. Epidemics were traced back to the workings of the vengeful powers of a kami (*tatari*) and methods of quelling these were shared in society.

### *Salvation and Natural Disasters*

In medieval society, which had seen the wide dissemination of Buddhist doctrine and the formation of a systematic interpretation of the cosmos and the world, it became more common to see the occurrence of natural disasters within the context of a larger law of cause and effect (*ingaritsu*). The Confucian theory of divine punishment (*tenken* 天譴) further boosted this tendency.

The eleventh century was a turning point in medieval Japan, in which the image of the other world (*higan*) as the ideal world expanded. For a majority of people at that time, the real world was only a temporary abode on their way to the Pure Land (*Jōdo*) after death (SATŌ 2000, 25). People assumed that there was a transcendental deity at the fundament of the universe that administered salvation and that the intentions of this deity were the moving force in the

world. Because of this shared world view, disasters also came to be interpreted in connection with theories of salvation in the medieval period.

Between 1257 and 1260, the Japanese archipelago was afflicted by a massive famine, known as the Shōka famine (正嘉の飢饉) after the name of the era in which it occurred. In eastern Japan, continuing frigid temperatures were further exacerbated by continual rain and storms. The shortage of grain caused by these disasters was accompanied by epidemics. The roads were littered with corpses and filled with the shambling, ghost-like shapes of the starving.

Nichiren (1222–1282) and Shinran (1173–1263) experienced this famine first-hand. Nichiren submitted his *Risshō ankoku ron* (Treatise on establishing the right teaching and bringing peace to the land) in the seventh month of 1260 to the regent Hōjō Tokiyori. In the opening of the text, he described vividly the horrors caused by the Shōka famine (*Shinranshū Nichirensū* 1964, 292). Nichiren, who was in Kamakura at the time, personally witnessed the effects of the famine. He determined the cause of the disaster to lie in the fact that the protective kami had abandoned the country in revulsion at the spread of Hōnen's practice of exclusively relying on reciting the name of Amida (*senju nenbutsu*). He further argued that in order to call back these protective kami and establish the "peace of the nation" (*ankoku*), it was indispensable to ban the *nenbutsu* and promote the *Lotus Sutra*, which contains the True Dharma (*shōbō*).

For Nichiren, these calamities were warnings directed by the Buddha to those closing their eyes to true faith. By taking this to heart and putting it into practice, it would be possible to bring peace back to the land and ultimately enable people to reach an eternal world of enlightenment. Conversely, Nichiren argued, if this warning continued to go unheeded, punishments in the form of calamities would further escalate, and Japan would slowly slide into extinction.

On the thirteenth day of the eleventh month, four months after Nichiren submitted the *Risshō ankoku ron*, Shinran sent a letter from Kyoto to his followers in Hitachi Province, where he used to live. In the letter, Shinran wrote the following.

It is saddening that so many people, both young and old, men and women, have died this year and last. But the Tathagata taught the truth of life's impermanence for us fully, so you must not be distressed by it.<sup>2</sup>

Shinran's comments concerning the Shōka famine are tame compared to what Nichiren had to say. Nichiren wrote about the horrific scenes caused by the famine at length, aiming harsh words at rulers and practitioners of *nenbutsu*

2. See *Shinranshū Nichirensū*, 124. English translation taken from *The Collected Works of Shinran*; see <http://shinranworks.com/letters/lamp-for-the-latter-ages/6-2/> (accessed 30 July 2015).

alike. In contrast, Shinran wrote that while many people had died because of the famine, the Buddha had already taught “life’s impermanence” and therefore this should not be something surprising.

It might be possible to seek the reason for this difference in their responses in the fact that Nichiren had been right in the epicenter of the famine, while Shinran had been at a distance from it. However, what might be thought of as more crucial are the different world views held by these two figures. It was Nichiren’s consistent belief that this world is essentially the Buddha-land (*bukkokudo*) and that it is possible to manifest it in the here and now.

On the other hand, for Hōnen’s disciple Shinran, this world was basically nothing more than a defiled realm that should be left behind. The continuous stream of famine victims was certainly something sad. However, it was not enough to merely lament the arrival of the calamity. Instead, it was necessary to face the reality of this impermanent world and call to mind the teaching of the “impermanence of life and death” (*shōji mujō*). Shinran took the famine as an opportunity to try to guide his disciples away from their attachments to the mundane world and make them open their eyes to the true faith.

Nichiren and Shinran contrast in their responses to the Shōka famine, but on a more fundamental level they shared common ground. What they held in common was that both of them understood the tragedy unfolding in front of them within the context of the salvational mechanism emanating from the Buddha existing at the foundation of the universe. For both of them, the ordeal of the famine was an indispensable step towards reaching the world of enlightenment. Their ultimate goal was not the end of the calamity and the restoration of normalcy, but to go even further, towards the achievement of final salvation. This kind of interpretation was alien to the people of ancient Japan who regarded the basic function of the kami as lying in their “miracles” (*ryōi*) and aimed at calming the *tatari* of individual kami. A sophisticated and systematic interpretation of cosmology was something that first emerged out of medieval developments in the spiritual realm.

While Shinran and Nichiren sought to understand the ghastly disasters as part of the grand salvational scheme of the Buddha, this does not mean that they welcomed such calamities. Without doubt, they were deeply troubled by these recurring disasters. Precisely because of this, they were willing to suffer a powerful backlash from traditional Buddhism, and in order to rescue the people from calamity, they promoted practices such as the exclusive *nenbutsu* (in the case of Shinran) or the exclusive recitation of the *daimoku* (*senju shōdai*) (in the case of Nichiren) that offered salvation to everyone. However, the individual paths chosen by them diverged greatly.



*Contact Between the Living and the Dead*

The rich expressions of the afterlife that pervaded society suddenly began to wane at the start of the latter half of the medieval period in the fourteenth century. The heartfelt appeal of salvation after death faded and the importance put on the real world increased. At the end of this process came the arrival of early modern society in which people placed more weight on peace and comfort in this world than on salvation in the next.

Medieval theology, which sought to restructure the invisible transcendental world through abstract speculation, gradually lost its foothold. In its place, human knowledge about the natural world expanded and a spirit emerged that sought to elucidate the world's workings based on empirical evidence. Centered on the disciplines of medicine, agriculture, and calendarology, the mechanisms of the natural world and the human body were investigated and phenomena that used to be ascribed to the kami came to be explained in a scientific and logical manner. Instead of praying to the deities, people chose to seek secular, technical means to deal with the problems they were facing. Taking agricultural technology as an example, by improving breeds as well as improvements made in the realm of farm tools and fertilizer, productivity increased dramatically. This marked the transition from the "period of rice field plays" (*ta'asobi no jidai*), with its reliance on magical invocations towards the Buddhist deities and kami, to the "period of agricultural manuals" (*nōsho no jidai*) in which productive technologies in agriculture achieved a certain degree of autonomy (KURODA 1985).

The secularization of society and the decreased role of the deities further advanced the expansion of the realm of this world and the contraction of the realm of the other world. People no longer saw embarking on the journey to the faraway afterworld as their ideal. The life that people in early modernity had in mind was one in which they would first thoroughly enjoy this "floating world" (*ukiyo*) and then continue to communicate with their descendants even after death while resting peacefully in one corner of this world.

However, despite this increase in rational thinking and scientific knowledge about nature, people were still powerless in the face of massive natural disasters. As a matter of fact, the Edo period saw the recurring outbreak of famines due to extraordinary natural phenomena. The daily dangers to life and body were also much greater than in contemporary society. People in the early modern period were forced to live in close proximity to death.

In times such as the middle ages, when people had a shared sense of the existence of an ideal world after death, it was possible to entrust the dead to this system of salvation without fear. By regarding falling victim to calamities as one step towards salvation, people were able to attain a certain peace of mind.

However, in the early modern period, in which the figure of an absolute savior disappeared, this was no longer possible. Alongside simply enduring calamities as natural occurrences, people in the early modern period invented a variety of new rituals and customs to ensure that even the spirits of those who had died unnatural deaths would be free of anger and rest peacefully. This relationship of ancestors and descendants entering from time to time into close communication with each other, as Yanagita Kunio described in *Senzo no hanashi*, thus took shape in early modern society. Through memorial services for the dead (*kuyō girei*) that were conducted for a long time following the death of a person, the deceased ultimately lost their identity as spirits of the dead (*shiryō*) and turned into kami granting protection to their descendants (YANAGITA 1990).

In the past, a folk custom in Tsugaru taught that when a child died, a stone Jizō figure would be carved that resembled the child's facial features and then would be enshrined at a temple. The two thousand Jizō figures at the Kawakura Jizōdō temple 川倉地藏堂 bear witness to this tragic history. Tsugaru was an area that suffered from frequent cold weather damage to crops. During famines, the weak—especially children—were the first victims. Although this was not a case of *mabiki*, those lacking the strength to survive died one after the other.

In the face of extraordinary natural phenomena, there was nothing that parents could do. All fathers and mothers were left with was to look on as their children grew weak due to starvation, became emaciated, and their spark of life slowly grew dimmer.

When the crisis eventually passed, the survivors recalled the faces of their children and carved them onto Jizō figures. Contained in the gentle expressions of these figures was the ardent wish that people would never have to suffer from starvation again. From time to time, parents would visit the temple and talk to the Jizō figure while stroking their cold surface, gently apply makeup, and change the clothes worn by the figures. Through this mode of communication, the dead reborn as Jizō figures could share their lives with those still alive. This was not just the case in Tsugaru. Most of the uncountable Jizō bodhisattvas found at crossroads in eastern Japan carry within them the memories of past calamities and tragedies. They contain the deep compassion for those children whose lives were cut short by a violent death.

### *Overlapping Life and Death*

To witness close-up how a loved one grows weak and passes away—such a connection carries on after death, with this kind of bond transcending the mundane world that used to exist in the past everywhere in Japan.

However, this has become rare today. People in a critical state are quarantined in intensive care units and are entrusted to professional health care providers.

While treated, even close relatives are prohibited from visiting them. In the clinical context, it seems that emphasis is put more on prolonging the patient's life for as long as possible than on the wishes of the patient or their family. Existence in whatever form has become the sole objective and turned into the highest value.

Once death has been determined, the body becomes the responsibility of professional morticians. A string of rational and polished rituals is conducted in quick succession and before one realizes, the funeral is over and the bereaved family is holding the ashes. After having hurriedly conducted the funeral, these people return the next day to their workplace, going about their everyday lives as if nothing has happened. In the extremely functionalized social system of contemporary Japan, the dying person as well as those close to him or her have not been allowed any active role in this moment that ought to be of utmost importance within the trajectory of a life that is essentially a transition from life to death.

There are without doubt those who will see in the background the busy nature of modern life. But is this all? I believe that there is a fundamental difference between how Japanese now see death and how they did in the past.

As expressed in the phrase "time of death, xx hours, xx minutes," we think today that it is possible to draw a clear line between life and death. The exact determination of death is a difficult question debated among specialists, but despite this, many people have the image that there is a dividing moment in which the living cross into the world of the dead. However, seen from the long-term perspective of human history, this commonly held understanding is extremely specific to and characteristic of the modern and contemporary periods.

In premodern society, it was common to recognize the existence of a temporally and spatially liminal realm between life and death. The extent of this realm differed depending on the historical period and region, but its longest duration was determined to last between seven and ten days. Even after breathing stopped, death was not determined right away. It was believed that the person had not yet died, but was wandering the realm in between life and death (SATŌ 2008).

What those who remained caught in this realm were believed to do varied with the cultural background of the time. In the ancient period, with its strong sense that the worlds of the living and the dead overlap, rebirth of the deceased was prayed for through customs such as the *tama yobai* (summoning of the soul). Texts from the time such as the *Nihon ryōiki* (Record of miraculous events in Japan) include many tales (*setsuwa*) in which the dead come back to life when the soul that had left the body returns into it.<sup>3</sup> The Heian period

3. See *Nihon ryōiki* volume one, tale 30, volume two, tales 5, 7, 25, and so on. Translation adapted from that found in Lisa Nelson, "The Go-Tsuchimikado Shinkan-bon ~ Izumi Shikibu Shū: A Translation of the Poems and an Analysis of Their Sequence," page 200, at <http://scholarworks.umass.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1531&context=theses> (accessed 3 August 2015).

poet Izumi Shikibu wrote in her poem “On the last night of the twelfth month,” “Although I have heard there is a night when the dead come back, you are not here. Is the place I live, a village without a soul?” (from *Goshūi wakashū*, 1994). As expressed in this poem, it was thought that even after death was determined, the soul would leave its grave in the ground and wander this world.

During the medieval period, in which the sense of the actual existence of the ideal world in the afterlife grew stronger, memorial rituals came to be conducted with the aim of sending the dead to the Pure Land. Clutching the ashes of their deceased family members, many people sought out sacred places such as Mt. Kōya for interment. As part of this process, people would talk to the dead while holding their ashes and communicate with them one last time before letting them depart to the faraway other world. Once the journey to the burial site was complete and the dead had successfully been reborn in the Pure Land (*ōjō*), they no longer existed in this world. However, even then the relationship between the living and dead was not interrupted. Memorial services were still conducted continuously in order to make sure that spirits that might still be lingering in this world because of some mistake would be sent off to the other world in an act similar to gleaned leftover crops or to enable a dead spirit in the afterlife to ascend to a higher stage.

In the early modern period, in which a shared sense emerged that the dead did not depart to a distant place but stayed on in this world, memorial services were conducted to enable the dead to shed the grievances and grudges they had held during life and turn them into pacified spirits resting peacefully within the grave and not aimlessly wandering the earth.

### *Modernity: A Strange Age*

In premodern society, the zone of contact between life and death was not limited to a certain period after breathing had stopped. Already during life a variety of rites were conducted as steps toward the world after death, and after death had been determined, memorial services continued to be conducted for some time.

An example of the former is the group called Nijūgo zanmai-e 二十五三昧会 that was formed on Mt. Hiei in the latter half of the tenth century. This group was a religious society (*kessha*) based on the wish for rebirth in the Pure Land. Alongside proceeding with preparations for life after death as usual, when a member of the group died, there were detailed regulations for death watch and funeral rites to guarantee a dignified death (see *Goshūi wakashū*, 188; GENSHIN (1971)). An example of the latter are the memorial services widely conducted during the Edo period extending from seventy-seven days to thirty-three or fifty years after death.

It is not just that there is a certain margin between life and death. It was the common perception of people in premodern society that before and after death

there is a long period of time in which the world of the living and the world of the dead interact. The living and the dead share the same space while communicating with each other. People did not think of life and death as essentially different states.

In comparison to this long-existing pattern of interaction between the living and the dead since antiquity, modernity draws a distinct and unsurpassable line between life and death. We can thus understand it as a time period seeking the complete expulsion of the dead from the world of the living. Death is kept at a distance and even the simple fact that everyone has to die cannot be expressed in public. After the funeral, once a deceased person has set foot into the world of death, the living immediately return to everyday life. Because the dead inhabit a different world, they are no longer equal conversation partners, but only mere objects of one-sided commemoration.

It was not only the living and dead that inhabited the same space in premodern society. The kami, buddhas, animals, and plants all formed part of the same world. Now, there are only traces of this left in such things as the bear sacrifice (*kumaokuri*) of the Ainu and the folktales of the Inuit, but societies in which animals and plants communicated with each other on an equal footing existed on this planet for thousands or tens of thousands of years (NAKAZAWA 2002). According to the *Nihon shoki* (volume 1, 134), in the past plants on the Japanese archipelago uttered words, but they no longer speak to us. This is not because the plants have turned silent. It is because we have forgotten how to listen to them.

Prayers made with a pious mind towards the kami made people realize their own wicked and humble existence. The whispered words directed towards the dead or animals and plants also infused the gentle gaze directed towards the people in one's vicinity. Once these had been expunged from society as "the other," people lost the framework to keep their ego in check, and they began to run wild in a drive for unlimited expansion.

The public space created by the kami and the dead used to fulfill in everyday life the role of a cushion to prevent the direct occurrence of conflicts of interest among people. I was raised in a mountain village in the southern part of Miyagi Prefecture. During the mid-1950s to mid-1960s, when I was a child, shrine festivals held in every community were still the center of community life in agricultural villages in the Tohoku region. On the occasion of the festival at Kashima shrine, the largest shrine in my village, afternoon classes were canceled at my elementary school. The time-consuming preparations for the festival were advanced and the surrounding paths mended and cleaned.

When I visit my village now, most of the shrines see no visitors and have fallen into ruin. Grass grows on the paths and it is even difficult to walk on them. The narrow paths on the shrine grounds used to also function as community roads

to get to school and other facilities. Even people who normally disliked exerting themselves for others enthusiastically participated in communal activities for the kami and buddhas. These activities had the function of maintaining the tiny paths criss-crossing the village like capillary vessels. However, when the kami lost their role of creating communal space, the people who used to maintain those paths also automatically disappeared.

As the postwar academic study of history has shown, it should not be forgotten that religion had also become complicit in the logic of domination and exploitation. How many people have been murdered in the name of a deity? This kind of foolishness is still going on today. However, on the other hand, it is also an undeniable fact that under the moniker of shrine rituals (*shinji*) and shrine festivals (*saiji*), a space was created that allowed people to interact and communicate across class-lines, and public facilities such as roads, bridges, or squares could be built and repaired. When conflicts between two groups could not be resolved, people submitted to the verdict of the kami (SHIMIZU 2010).

When people lost the ability to send messages to the kami, the buddhas, or the dead, nonhuman entities were expelled from the society and world around us. All intermediaries were eliminated and a situation was arrived at in which humans were facing each other in a straightforward manner. Having developed thorns for self-protection, humans were pressed into a narrow box without any cushion and modern society, in which the slightest movement will result in the injury of someone else, was born.

In a short period of time the earthquake of 11 March 2011 created a large number of dead and missing and caused vast destruction. The depth and size of the scars it left peeled off the superficial top layer of contemporary society, which we had taken for granted for so long. It thus made us question the meaning of life and death on a fundamental level.

### *People Who are Worshipped as Kami*

Scattered throughout the area around Mt. Yudono in Yamagata Prefecture are the bodies of self-mummified religious practitioners (*sokushinbutsu*) who had themselves voluntarily inserted into the ground in search of enlightenment. These mummies have become objects of worship. According to a temple legend, the figure of Chūkai Shōnin 忠海上人, who worshipped at Kaikōji temple 海向寺 in Sakata, came from a low-ranking warrior (*bushi*) family, the Togashi clan. It is said that after living for two years in Senninzawa and abstaining from eating cereals (*mokujikigyō*), Chūkai Shōnin had himself interred in the ground in 1755 as part of his quest for enlightenment (*dochū nyūjō*). Shinnyokai Shōnin 真如海上人, who is worshipped at the temple Dainichibō, underwent self-mummification in 1783. It is said that after practicing *mokujikigyō* for one thousand days, he

entered the ground alive, and passed away while sounding a gong and reciting scriptures.

Both of these years fell in the middle of severe famines. These two cases of self-mummification have in common with the majority of other *sokushinbutsu* that they occurred during years of famine. Naitō Masatoshi has pointed this out by asking, “was it not that the essential idea behind the practice of abstaining from cereals, in which the religious practitioners known as *isse gyōnin* at Mt. Yudono engaged, was to starve one’s own body in order to pray for the starving people?” (NAITŌ 1999, 176). Naitō saw these *sokushinbutsu* as reflecting a messianic idea that had been passed on in Japanese folk beliefs.

A majority of those who underwent self-mummification at Mt. Yudono came from low-ranking *bushi* or peasant families. Undergoing ever-harsher practices, they fasted themselves to death. What can be seen in these instances are common people who shouldered the misfortune of others with their own bodies and laid down their lives in order to alleviate the effects of the disasters. In response, others began to worship these figures as deities.

Following the earthquake of 2011, I sometimes had the opportunity to visit the affected areas along the coast. Whenever I stood on ground that had been swept clean by the tsunami, I imagined the moment the tsunami hit. Many people lost their lives in the tsunami trying to fulfill their duties. For example, fire fighters who had been on their way to the coast in order to close the levee gates. Others had been swept away while continuing to guide others to safety. Yet others disappeared while continuing to broadcast warnings, and some failed to flee in time because they were rescuing complete strangers.

I myself could have easily died in the disaster. I am not alive—I have been allowed to remain alive. Whenever I stand on ground destroyed by the disaster, this thought is etched into my heart.

How many lives have been lost since the birth of mankind? To die surrounded by one’s family with a tranquil expression on one’s face was rather the exception. Without doubt, the number of those who died in unforeseen catastrophes without time to reflect on their lives is far higher. The number of those who, like the *sokushinbutsu*, sacrificed their own lives in exchange for the happiness of others is also likely enormous.

We cannot force others to sacrifice themselves. However, if there were no people to sacrifice themselves in order to save others, our existence today would be unthinkable. Their lives possess a shine that cannot be simply measured in the length of their existence. Precisely for this reason, our ancestors praised these people as deities and sought to commemorate their actions for eternity.

Unlike contemporary society, which has made longevity its goal, these societies put supreme value on the complete obliteration of one’s own life in the

pursuit of benefitting others. In support of this, there existed a world view that saw life and death as a unity.

### *Conclusion*

However much civilization evolves, it is our fate that disasters are unavoidable. As in the case of wars, nuclear accidents, or ethnic strife, there are also instances in which civilization further exacerbates disasters.

All the people that lived on these islands in the past could do was search for the cause of the recurring disasters in the workings of the kami. Exactly how the causal relationship between the kami and natural disasters was interpreted differed from era to era in accordance with the amount of scientific knowledge available and the dominant cosmology. However, against the background of strong beliefs in the existence of the kami, people sought to understand the disasters descending on them as something inevitable. Every time, a disaster would result in the loss of many lives. Based on the premise of the existence of the kami, the people of the Japanese archipelago sought to soothe their mutual pain by constructing a long-lasting intimate relationship that went beyond this world with those who had died an untimely death.

However, the shrinking of the world of the kami that occurred as the modern period approached did not allow for the continuation of this kind of relationship. A strict line was drawn between the worlds of the living and the dead and they came to be clearly distinguished from each other. Not only the dead, but also the kami, animals, and plants were expelled from the world of humans, leading to the arrival of a society in which humans sharply face each other as privileged entities. This marked the birth of the modern age founded on anthropocentric humanism.

Along Iwate prefecture's Sanriku coast, there were several hundred folk art groups performing such arts as *kagura*, *shishi odori*, or *kenbai*. Most of these suffered tremendous damage due to the tsunami of 11 March. Immediately following the disaster, religious rites and festivals were canceled, but were subsequently revived in many regions in advance of full-fledged reconstruction efforts. Although entire towns had disappeared and costumes as well as instruments been lost, performances were conducted in memory of the victims of the disaster by sharing among the troupes the equipment absolutely necessary for the performances. In the summer, portable shrines and local art troupes could be seen parading through devastated towns in all the regions (TŌHOKU BUNKA-ZAI EIZŌ KENKYŪJO 2012).

Confronting an extreme disaster, shrine rituals transcend the mere level of folk arts and become once more bonds connecting people with each other. In all localities, the kami created new public spaces. Not limited to shrine rituals, in all



regions in which there still exist functioning communities, it seems that revival takes place a little earlier.

Upon reflection we realize that the kami have been the oldest partners of humanity. From before the advent of the state, humans and kami have coexisted. The kami, who modern man once sought to expel from a society that disliked their rule, are now displaying newfound vigor towards their rebirth in the San-riku region.

This makes me once again wonder what kind of entity human beings are, who have always needed the existence of the kami. What kind of age is modernity that seeks to expel the kami from society as the Other?

From in between the enormous rifts that the catastrophe of 11 March has opened in society, modernity shows itself as a strange age. Today, the majority of people cannot believe in the existence of an absolute supreme god and submit themselves to providential salvation. It is also impossible to recreate a time in which the living and dead peacefully coexist. However, by being aware that such a time once existed, it is possible to relativize the ground on which we currently stand.

Today, when the extinction of humanity is increasingly becoming a possibility, we are all individually required as bearers of the earth's future to make the tough choice of which path to follow. Precisely because we are facing a historical turning point, it is necessary to contemplate our current location within the framework of time spans—such as one hundred or one thousand years—and think hard about which direction to take.

## REFERENCES

### GENSHIN 源信

- 1971 Yokawa Shuryōgon'in nijūgo zanmai kishō 横川首楞嚴院二十五三昧起請.  
In *Eshin sōzu zenshū* 恵心僧都全集, vol. 1. Kyoto: Shibunkaku.

### Goshūi wakashū 後拾遺和歌集

- 1994 Shin Nihon Koten Bungaku Taikei 新日本古典文学大系. Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten.

### HACHINOHE SHI 八戸市

- 1976 *Hachinohe shi shi* 八戸市史 [Hachinohe City history]. Hachinohe: Hachinohe City.

### KIKUCHI Isao 菊池勇夫

- 1997 *Kinsei no kikin* 近世の飢饉. Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kōbunkan.

### Kojiki 古事記

- 1973 Nihon Koten Bungaku Zenshū 日本古典文学全集. Tokyo: Shogakukan.

KURODA Hideo

- 1985 Sengoku, Shokuhōki no gijutsu to keizai hatten 戦国・織豊期の技術と経済発展. In *Kōza Nihon rekishi chūsei 2* 講座日本歴史 中世二. Tokyo: Tōkyō Daigaku Shuppankai.

NAITŌ Masatoshi 内藤正敏

- 1999 *Nihon no mīra shinkō* 日本のミイラ信仰. Kyoto: Hōzōkan.

NAKAZAWA Shin'ichi 中沢新一

- 2002 *Kuma kara ō e* 熊から王へ. Tokyo: Kōdansha Sensho Mechie.

*Nihon ryoiki* 日本靈異記

- 1967 *Nihon Koten Bungaku Taikei* 日本古典文学大系, vol. 70. Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten.

*Nihon sandai jitsuroku zenhen* 日本三代実録 前篇

- 1952 *Shintei Zōho Kokushi Taikei* 新訂増補国史大系. Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kōbunkan.

*Nihon shoki* 日本書紀

- 1967 *Nihon Koten Bungaku Taikei*, vol. 1. Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten.

ORIKUCHI Shinobu 折口信夫

- 1995- “Ho,” “ura,” kara “hogahi” e 「ほ」・「うら」から「ほがひ」へ. In *Orikuchi Shinobu zenshū* 16 折口信夫全集 16. Tokyo: Chūō Kōron Shinsha.

SATŌ Hiroo 佐藤弘夫

- 2000 *Amaterasu no henbō* アマテラスの変貌. Kyoto: Hōzōkan.  
2008 *Shisha no yukue* 死者のゆくえ. Tokyo: Iwata Shoin.

SHIMIZU Katsuyuki 清水克行

- 2010 *Nihon shinpan shi* 日本神判史. Tokyo: Chūkō Shinsho.

*Shinranshū Nichirensū* 親鸞集日蓮集

- 1964 *Nihon Koten Bungaku Taikei*. Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten.

SUGAE Masumi 菅江真澄

- 1971 *Sotogahamakaze* そとがはまかぜ. In *Sugae Masumi zenshū* 菅江真澄全集, vol. 1. Tokyo: Miraisha.

TŌHOKU BUNKAZAI EIZŌ KENKYŪJO 東北文化財映像研究所

- 2012 3.11 *Higashi Nihon daishinsai o norikoete* 3.11 東日本大震災を乗り越えて. DVD. Murasakino Kitakami, Iwate Prefecture.

YANAGITA Kunio 柳田國男

- 1971 *Kokyō nanajūnen* 故郷七十年. In *Teihon Yanagita Kunio shū bekkān* 3 底本柳田國男集別卷三. Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō.  
1990 *Senzo no hanashi* 先祖の話. In *Yanagita Kunio zenshū* 13 柳田國男全集. Tokyo: Chikuma Bunko.

Translated by Erik Schicketanz