

Multifaceted Divinities in Japan and Beyond – Conference Proposal

Conference in Memory of Prof. Zwi Werblowsky (1924-2015)

Dates: May 29th- May 31st

Place: Hebrew University and Tel Aviv University

Keynote speaker: Prof. Bernard Faure, Columbia University (confirmed)

Organizers: Irit Averbuch (TAU), Yagi Morris (SOAS)

In recent years, individual Japanese divinities feature as a prominent theme in scholarship of medieval Japan. As the form through which divine power is manifested on the ground and is transmitted to the human sphere, divinities are pivotal to the understanding of the religious sphere. The current interest in divinities, however, stems from a changing perception of the history of Japanese religiosity. In the past few decades, scholars of medieval Japan undermined the Shinto/Buddhist dichotomy that had dominated the field. Instead, they highlighted the creative combinatory process that began with the introduction of Buddhism to Japan and continued up until the Meiji restoration. It was this process that gave rise to the religion we know today as “Shinto”, and to the evolution of various categories of divine beings that constitute the Japanese pantheon.

The medieval period saw the peak of the combinatory process. It involved a complex interchange of indigenous religious practices and cults with those imported from the continent: Buddhist, of course, but also Daoist and Hindu, which were of paramount significance in the shaping of Japanese religiosity. This confluence of various religious systems took place within major cultic sites in Japan as well as within the Imperial house, and it enveloped the entirety of the Japanese religious

landscape. It also involved a complex and innovative systematization of Japanese religiosity, and of notions of sovereignty and polity, which were closely linked to the religious sphere.

It was within this context that the medieval pantheon came into being. The pantheon was a dynamic structure that was continuously shaped and re-shaped both by inner currents within the religious sphere and by social, geographical and political circumstances specific to Japan. This affected the nature of individual divinities. In a state of both harmony and contradiction, these divinities embody the coexistence of local and trans-local discourses, such as the Buddhist discourse on enlightenment and the Japanese discourse on the divine land/nation (*shinkoku*). As well, we find a whole range of doctrines, ritual practices, symbolic and cosmogonic systems embodied in each and every divinity. Divinities, in their multiple and chaotic identities - epitomizing both “self” and “other” - thus encapsulate the combinatory process.

Rather than mere objects of worship, divinities were powerful figures that acted in this world and shaped reality through complex ritual systems. Their combinatory nature had impact on their role in the social and political realms. They were pivotal entities in the creation of notions of identity, territory and sovereignty. Divinities continued to bear meaning throughout history; many had adjusted and maintained their cultic relevance through the Edo Period, and some have survived even the great religious break of the Meiji period, and are worshipped to this day.

Conference Objectives:

The conference seeks to investigate the interaction of Buddhism and local cults through portraits of individual, often multi-faceted or pantheon-like, divinities. It will explore how local divinities adapted to the Buddhist discourse and how Buddhism

created and integrated local gods, as well as a whole range of supernatural beings, into its system. Through such portraits of individual deities we hope to unravel how divine power was constructed and expressed in a combinatory religious context.

The examination of Buddhism and local cults in Japan calls for a broader exploration of the theme in other Asian cultures where divinities of local cults thrive under Buddhist influence. The conference thus incorporates papers dealing with divinities of complex nature in East Asia in general. Our aim is to open a theoretical discussion on the multivalent identity of gods in East Asian cultures.

The Late Prof. Zwi Werblowsky, who passed away last summer, was a world-renowned scholar of comparative religion with particular affinity to Japanese religions. The conference will be held in his memory at both the Hebrew University, where he served as Dean for many years, and in Tel Aviv University, which promotes the study of Japanese religions in Israel. Following the conference, we plan to hold a tour in sacred places around Jerusalem.

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Invited participants:

Key note speech: Prof. Bernard Faure, Columbia University

Prof. Suzuki Masataka, Keio University, Tokyo

Dr. Gaynor Sekimori, SOAS, London

Prof. Fabio Rambelli, University of California, Santa Barbara

Prof. Mark Teeuwen, Oslo University, Oslo

Prof. Saitō Hideki, Buddhist University, Kyoto

Prof. Abe Yasurō, Nagoya University, Nagoya

Prof. Gil Raz, Dartmouth College, New Hampshire

Prof. Lucia Dolce, SOAS, London

Dr. Kadoya Atsushi, Waseda University, Tokyo, Iwaki Meisei University, Iwaki

Dr. Carina Roth Al Eid, University of Geneva, Geneva

Dr. Sujung Kim, DePauw University, Indiana

Participants from Israel:

Prof. Meir Shahr, Tel Aviv University

Dr. Irit Averbuch, Tel Aviv University

Dr. Ehud Halperin, Tel Aviv University

Ms. Yagi Morris, SOAS

Dr. Eviatar Shulman, Tel Aviv University

Mr. Or Porath, University of California, Santa Barbara