

The Tantricization of Gods and Deities in Medieval Japan: Bernard Faure's *The Fluid Pantheon* and *Protectors and Predators*

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In 2015 the University of Hawai'i Press published two volumes of Bernard Faure's proposed four volume work on the gods of medieval Japan, *Gods of Medieval Japan, Vol. 1: The Fluid Pantheon* and *Gods of Medieval Japan, Vol. 2: Protectors and Predators*.¹ For the 2017 meeting of the American Academy of Religion, I organized a review panel that included the four contributors whose presentations have been revised for publication in this special section.

The tantric tradition in Japan can be approached from a variety of perspectives: as an example of sect formation, or the adaptation of tantra to a new religious culture, or an instance of the permeation of a religious culture by tantric praxis. No matter the approach taken, Bernard Faure's *Gods of Medieval Japan* provides details regarding tantric gods and deities, both imported and indigenous "converts," essential for future research.

Faure brings a lifetime of research and theorizing to the study of gods and deities in medieval Japan, a time of "mythical and ritual proliferation."² Going beyond formal pantheons, he organizes this mass of information by structuralist and post-structuralist approaches, as well as actor-network theory.

Faure's work expands the study of medieval Japanese religion in three directions. First, he moves us away from the elite versus popular dichotomy. His scope is more inclusive than simply a study of tantric

1. Bernard Faure, *Gods of Medieval Japan, Vol. 1: The Fluid Pantheon*; and *Gods of Medieval Japan, Vol. 2: Protectors and Predators* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015–2016).

2. *Ibid.*, 2:2.

maṇḍalas, but he does not deploy a simplistic notion of folk religion. He has “tried to point beyond the systemic or structural aspects of the Japanese pantheon by contrasting an implicit, virtual pantheon with the explicit, established pantheon of orthodox Mikkyō,”³ as esoteric Buddhism is known in Japan. Second, he calls attention to the need for more study of Tendai esoteric Buddhism. Perhaps because of the prominence of *Lotus Sutra* cults in modern Japan, the study of Tendai has focused more on its exoteric aspects—*Lotus Sutra* and historical relations to Tiantai—or on it as a source for the new “Kamakura Buddhisms.” Yet Tendai priests were as instrumental in spreading tantric practices, doctrines, and deities throughout medieval Japanese religion as were Shingon priests. Third, while the distinction between Buddhism and Shintō is now well-recognized as a late development, Faure documents the dynamic interconnectedness of buddhas and *kami* as central to medieval Japanese religion.

Faure’s work also has important theoretical implications. It rebuts compartmentalizing the academic study of Buddhism, treating the Buddhism of Japan as different in kind from that of China, Korea, Tibet, or India. The gods and deities who thematize his study have moved across continents, transited the boundaries between religious cultures, and adapted to identities structured in a variety of languages. Despite decontextualization and recontextualization, the gods and deities travel not as essences, but as potentials that can manifest in sometimes surprising ways.

Faure also challenges Buddhist studies scholars to expand beyond the limitations of a purely textual scholarship. In worlds where literacy was not common, the meaning and significance of Buddhism is expressed intersemiotically by images and objects. This work is one of only a few that fully integrates an art historical approach into Buddhist studies.

This work also challenges a preconception religious studies inherited from traditional mythology that a “biographical” narrative structure is a “natural” approach to the subject matter of gods and deities. In keeping with both structuralist and Buddhist perspectives, Faure calls attention to how “The essentialist or ‘personalist’ approach to the

3. *Ibid.*, 2:12.

gods fails to recognize that a deity exists only against the background of a social imaginary, that is, within a conceptual field.”⁴

The four presentations discuss the work from differing and complementary perspectives.

Kristin Johnston Largen’s “The Medusa, the Centaur, and the Dragon-Goddess: An Indirect Look at Benzaiten” takes the perspective of women’s studies and gender:

In any given culture, gods and divinities both reinforce and reflect notions of sexuality, gender and gender performance. Not only the descriptions of the deities themselves—how they look, how they act, and how they fit into a larger pantheon—but also who worships them and in what way reveals a great deal about traditional gender roles in a society. In my paper, I use the lens of gender analysis to read *Gods of Medieval Japan*, and offer some insights into what we can learn about women—women’s roles and women’s bodies—during that period in Japan.

Aaron Proffitt suggests that the works contribute to the study of the relation of esoteric Buddhism and Pure Land Buddhism in Japan in his “Neither Two nor One: Identity and Fluidity in Medieval Japan”:

Faure’s approach is useful for reevaluating assumptions about how “normative” objects of devotion functioned in the heterogeneous, always changing, environment of medieval Japan. In Esoteric Buddhist texts, “Amitābha” and the “*nenbutsu*” are nodes in a network—any and all practices may be subsumed under “*nenbutsu*” and any and all deities may be positioned in relation to or subsumed within “Amitābha.” Faure’s inquiry into heterogeneity, amalgamation, localization, competition, etc., addresses aspects of the cult of Amitābha and the practice of the *nenbutsu* that have eluded examination by most scholars of “Pure Land Buddhism” and “Esoteric Buddhism.”

Charles D. Orzech’s “Giving the Gods Their Due” places these new works in relation to Faure’s own past work:

Faure’s work on Japanese (and Chinese) religions has spanned Chan and Zen traditions, Esoteric Buddhism, iconography, and ritual. His keen critiques of orthodoxies (whether historical or recent; religious or scholarly) is inflected by deconstructive method, so as to clear away bias so we can see and understand what is alien. His *Gods of Medieval Japan* fits nicely into the history of French scholarship.

4. *Ibid.*, 1:26.

Challenging sectarian and scholarly taxonomies as anachronistic impositions, Faure uses structural, post-structural, and actor network theory to make sense of a vast range of data (historical, iconographical). This pushes beyond notions of the gods as mere figments of imagination or expressions of social forces. This essay places *The Gods of Medieval Japan* in the context of his past work and of similar efforts, and probe the extent his project offers us a better understanding of the medieval Japanese imaginaire.

In “Gods and Demons at the Intersection of Religion and Art History” Pamela D. Winfield approaches the work from the perspectives of religious studies and art history:

Since the late 1990s, historians of Japanese Buddhist art have shifted from secularized and decontextualized aesthetic concerns, to considering the ritual functions and religious contexts of Buddhist images. Faure’s work crosses disciplinary lines, taking up the Buddhist icon with theoretical sophistication, a trans-sectarian or non-sectarian approach, and a formal structure that heralds, perhaps, the birth of a new literary genre. Echoing the lengthy article-entries in the *Hōbōgirin* Buddhist encyclopedia, and integrating much from the old Flammarion iconographies, *The Gods of Medieval Japan* may introduce a new kind of narrative illustrated encyclopedia, restoring the symbiosis between religious studies and art history.

Taken together these provide important perspectives on what promises to be a foundational work on Japanese religion for the twenty-first century.