

Neither Two nor One: Identity and Fluidity in Medieval Japan

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In 2001, I arrived at college, and during my first week, I went to my professor's office hours and asked him, "How do I get your job?" At that point in my life I was a dedicated meditator and voracious reader of the works of D. T. Suzuki, Alan Watts, Jack Kerouac, and so on. Now, this professor could have simply dismissed me as yet another naïve seeker of perennial philosophy, but instead, he told me that if I was serious about a career in Buddhist studies, I should start studying Chinese and Japanese as soon as possible; and instead of spending my time with "Bookstore Buddhism," I should begin to familiarize myself with the serious scholarship that would tell me what Buddhism actually looked like "on the ground" (a phrase now overused, but at the time was quite popular). He then handed me a stack of books to begin reading immediately. For the next four years, I would return to his office again and again, each time leaving with a new stack of books. I remember clearly that the first stack of books included Bernard Faure's *Chan Insights and Oversights*.¹ As a Zen enthusiast, I found this book especially interesting and challenging, if not a little hard to read. This is when a light turned on for me. I discovered how much I did not know and how much more there was to learn, and I gave rise to the mind that seeks...a PhD. Sixteen years later, I am honored and delighted to have the opportunity to participate in a review of Faure's recent works, *The Fluid Pantheon* and *Protectors and Predators*.²

1. Bernard Faure, *Chan Insights and Oversights: An Epistemological Critique of the Chan Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

2. This paper was given at the American Academy of Religion Annual Conference, Boston, MA, November 19, 2017. I would like to thank the organizer, Richard Payne, another scholar whose work has profoundly

Volume 1, *The Fluid Pantheon*, presents the reader with a vast pantheon full of complex connections between the many nodes in Indra's Net of medieval Japanese Buddhism and Asian religions in general. One of the most interesting aspects of the Buddhist tradition is its capacity for absorbing and transforming deities, such that it is even possible to visit a "Buddhist" temple in Japan and worship the "Hindu" god Gaṇeśa. Taking medieval Japan as its starting point, Faure embeds the gods, buddhas, and bodhisattvas in their broader local and trans-regional context. Readers may find themselves being swept along as the identities of deities both obscure and well-known transform again and again.

The breadth of traditions examined within these two volumes is both a challenge and a boon for any reader. Those coming from various areas of interest and methodological approaches will benefit from these volumes in different ways. Each chapter in these two volumes is both fun and interesting to read. Readers may find themselves getting lost, but perhaps this is part of the fun. All too often scholars impose a kind of coherence where there is fluidity, order where there is disorder. Sometimes, in order to portray the complexity of a subject such as this, one must let go of the drive to seek *svabhāva* and instead accept the *sūnyatā* of the object of study, in this case, the gods of medieval Japan. Below, rather than summarize these volumes or provide a thumbnail sketch of each chapter, I will instead reflect upon how this work challenged me to reflect upon my own work and discuss a few characters that struck me. Given the depth and breadth of these works, I imagine that different scholars will react differently. Indeed, there is something for everyone.

The Fluid Pantheon and *Protectors and Predators* inspires reflection on issues like hybridity and heuristic problems in the study of Japanese religions. After graduating from college I moved to Japan to work as an English teacher. I had been studying Buddhism for over a decade at that point and was under the impression that I knew a thing or two about Buddhism. Upon encountering living Buddhist traditions,

impacted the direction of my scholarship. An alternate version of this review appears in the *Journal of Religion in Japan* 7 (2018). I would like to thank Hank Glassman of *Journal of Religion in Japan* and Richard Payne of *Pacific World* for their interest in my review of Faure's work, as well as their encouragement in submitting revised drafts to each journal.

however, I quickly learned that I knew nothing. The tidy rubrics I had learned in popular books about Shintō, Buddhism, Daoism, “popular religion,” etc. proved incompatible with the diverse traditions I encountered. Devotees who technically belonged to one tradition frequently transgressed the boundaries, which I soon came to realize were highly porous, if not entirely fictional. Similarly, deities I thought I understood to “behave” in certain ways surprised and even shocked me. Much scholarship still seems to rely on clearly defined and overly conservative boundaries between traditions, and this approach remains a stumbling block for many students exploring the diversity of early Japanese religion. Scholars interested in similar issues will benefit greatly from reading *The Fluid Pantheon* and *Protectors and Predators*.

According to Faure, “Medieval Japanese gods are truly *metamorphic* in the sense that they constantly *morph* from one form into another.”³ *The Fluid Pantheon* first presents a chart arranged so that it demonstrates how different buddhas, bodhisattvas, and gods connect to one another. As a specialist in esoteric approaches to Amida, I was curious as to why there were no lines connecting Amida, who sits alone in the top right, to other deities. The further I read, however, I found that there were many instances where a god would be revealed not only to be a form of Amida, but also instances where a god would be revealed to be the true form of Amida and other buddhas as well. In the introduction Faure reminds us that the purpose of this study is not simply to show us unknown sides of deities we think familiar, but also to bring to light deities that were important in medieval Japan but that have been erased either by modernity and State Shintō, the sectarian approach to the study of Japanese Buddhism, or both.

While reading through these volumes, I reflected as well on ways that Richard Payne’s scholarship harmonizes with Faure’s approach. Payne notes that scholarship on medieval Japan has often been dominated by the perspectives of the so-called “Kamakura Buddhist” schools: Pure Land, Zen, and Nichiren. These traditions developed out of a full or partial rejection of certain aspects of their contemporary traditions, especially the comprehensive *kenmitsu* approach to Buddhism, preferring instead to focus on a streamlined single-practice model. Modern interpreters and proponents of the Kamakura

3. Bernard Faure, *Gods of Medieval Japan, Vol. 1: The Fluid Pantheon* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2015), 48.

schools not only borrowed the anti-Catholic Protestant rhetoric of their European contemporaries, but also framed their rejection of the *kenmitsu* culture, still prevalent in Japan even today, in terms derived from Christian missionaries and Orientalist scholars who denigrated all of Buddhism as backwards superstition. Scholars like Faure and Payne have encouraged scholars to look beyond this rhetoric to take a more contextual and informed view, perhaps a post-modern, or even a post-post-modern, view that instead presents the kaleidoscopic world of medieval Japan.⁴

Faure renders the strange familiar and the familiar strange, reminding us that “...the name of a god remains shorthand for a given symbolic configuration at a particular moment and that the nominal continuity may hide a functional discontinuity.”⁵ In my own work in esoteric ritual manuals I continually encounter bodhisattvas who transform into buddhas who transform into bodhisattvas who transform into Sanskrit seed syllables, and so on. On Kōyasan, for example, there appears a kind of localized *trikāya* where Kūkai, Maitreya, and Mahāvairocana, as well as this world, the Tuṣita heaven, and the Pure Land of Esoteric Splendor (*Mitsugon jōdo*, the Pure Land of Mahāvairocana, a.k.a. the Pure Lands of the ten directions), abide in a state of tension, neither negating nor subsuming one another.

It is not just in medieval Japan that these deities are reimagined and reconfigured; as they move from India, to China, to Japan, deities shift and change. Sarasvatī becomes Benzaiten, accumulating and shedding identities like they were simple garments. Faure achieves a rare balance between the localized “Benzaiten” and the trans-regional “Sarasvatī.” It is important to remember that we cannot essentialize deities: Sarasvatī in India is *not the same thing* as Benzaiten in Japan, but they are not unrelated either. Neither the same, nor different, Nāgārjuna’s tetralemma comes to mind. In this way, Faure’s contextualized post-modern approach invokes ideas familiar to Buddhist epistemology and ontology.

Faure examines a number of deities, but I will touch briefly upon two: Myōken in chapter two of the *Fluid Pantheon*, and Uhō Doji in chapter seven. Myōken appears to have originally been a “Daoist” Great Monad (Taiyi) associated with Chinese astronomy and the worship

4. *Ibid.*, 14.

5. *Ibid.*, 15.

of the Northern Dipper, but through Japanese reverse *honji suijaku*, Myōken becomes the *honji* of Śākyamuni, Amitābha, Avalokiteśvara, and so on. In this shifting landscape Faure notes that “the center is everywhere and the circumference is nowhere.”⁶ Myōken was an important object of devotion until he was largely erased by the State Shintō cult. Deities like Myōken, a Buddho-Daoist *kami*, did not easily fit into the neat categories. Faure also considers the protector of Mt. Asama, Uhō Dōji. According to the *Uhō Dōji keigyaku*, attributed to Kūkai, Uhō Dōji takes on many forms such as the

red essence of all beings, the soul of all sentient and nonsentient beings, the *honji* of all gods, the creator of the sun, moon, and stars. In Japan he is Amaterasu; in India, the Buddhas Vairocana, Amitābha, and Śākyamuni; in China, Fu Xi, Shennong, and Huang Di. As the essence of Venus, he is also identified with Benzaiten (the essence of the sun) and Dakiniten (the essence of the moon).⁷

In this way, a seemingly marginal or minor localized deity is revealed to have a kind of unifying effect, channeling the undercurrent or substratum, connecting other major deities. Marginality perhaps gives a deity the ability to be reimagined and reinscribed, and thus elevated or submerged in the collective cultic consciousness.

In *Protectors and Predators*, Faure interrogates the assumption that underlies much of the work on *kami* traditions: that the *honji suijaku* paradigm is an example of syncretism or the “combination” of two discrete things, “Buddhism” and “Shintō.” Furthermore, Faure critiques even those scholars who would seem sympathetic to the “combinatory” nature of Japanese religion, those scholars who see these deities as operating in the “gray area” between Buddhism and Shintō. Faure questions the degree to which any such gray area exists, as well as the degree to which these diverse forms of deities function “between” Buddhism and Shintō, or, if in fact, the whole of medieval Japanese religion is permeated by these metamorphic gods such that there is no clearly defined Buddhism and Shintō to speak of at all. Perhaps from the perspective of sectarian studies such distinctions may carry greater urgency or weight. However, as Faure insists, if we take our cues from the lived religious practices of people in the medieval context, dividing up their worlds in such a way would distort far more than it clarifies.

6. *Ibid.*, 51.

7. *Ibid.*, 276.

The multiplicity, diversity, and complexity convey a dynamic aspect of that environment that should not be obscured by our need as scholars to craft a linear narrative.⁸ I would suggest that Faure's approach to this material, which occasionally bends and breaks the narrative teleology of the development of East Asian religions, is an excellent model to follow for those interested in investigating this material as well as those who aspire to examine critically those aspects of religion that appear "hybrid" or "syncretistic."

Following Deleuze and Guattari's conception of the "rhizome," Faure notes that not only do the buddhas become gods and the gods become buddhas, and back and forth, and diagonal, and so on, reaching far beyond warp and weft metaphors, they attain something more like "felt," a tangled matted mass. In the same way, Faure notes the writing of this book progressed in a similar way, causing him to attempt to "discipline" the work into coherence, but drawing upon Foucault, he resisted this impulse, proceeding "...diagonally, obliquely, in crab-like fashion, trying to maintain a fragile balance between too much order (which betrays the complexity of reality) and not enough (which makes a book unreadable)."⁹

Faure introduces a number of deities whose polymorphic identities include benign and demonic sides. For example, in *Protectors and Predators*, Gaṇeśa's dual nature is explored through his association with Vinayaka, his "demonic" form. Gaṇeśa is popularly known as the "remover of obstacles"; however, in India, he is also known as a playful, perhaps even trickster deity that may also place obstacles in your path. Faure notes that Gaṇeśa and Vinayaka are ultimately the same entity in the Indian context. In the Japanese context, Gaṇeśa is known as Shōten or Kangiten. Before reading Faure's work I had always imagined that Shōten was simply Gaṇeśa in Japan, but in fact, the "Japanese Gaṇeśa" has many of his own characteristics, and in the *honji suijaku*/reverse *honji suijaku* paradigm he is also associated with Amitābha, Mahāvairocana, Śiva, and even himself, serving as his own *honji*.¹⁰ (I was reminded of the old novelty song "I Am My Own Grandpa.") Japanese esoteric Buddhism is full of fluid entities that change form, and this

8. Bernard Faure, *Gods of Medieval Japan, Vol. 2: Protectors and Predators* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2016), 1–3.

9. *Ibid.*, 7.

10. *Ibid.*, 87.

reminds one of the mandala: all entities are contained: buddhas, bodhisattvas, gods, even demons and ordinary beings, and all of these are aspects of the ultimate reality, the *dharmakāya*. Any identities are only “real” from a particular perspective; every identity is in fact characterized by *śūnyatā* and may thus transform and change. Throughout these works, this notion is on full display and reveals a great deal about the nature of Japanese religion and the role of the gods as exemplifying *śūnyatā* in action.

In conclusion, I will briefly note a few issues that I found, but these minor critiques should not in any way detract from how highly I regard these works, and how readily I have and would recommend these works to my fellow scholars and even friends and colleagues. One of the things I found most exciting about these works is how consistently Faure engages with the Tendai tradition. In discussions of Esoteric Buddhism, the contemporary Shingon tradition is generally presented as if it were the ultimate litmus test for all things “esoteric.” The reality, of course, is far more complicated than that. In fact, the Shingon tradition as we know it today is of relatively recent origin, and developed gradually, evolving out of a shared concern for mastery of Esoteric rituals across major lineages and institutions throughout the early to late medieval period. As has become common knowledge these days, it was in fact the Tendai tradition that dominated Esoteric Buddhist thought and practice for much of Japanese history. Faure’s consistent engagement with Tendai is therefore responding to this trend. In chapter 8 of *Protectors and Predators*, Faure considers, for example, the god Matarajin, a protector of Tendai practitioners of the *nenbutsu*. In particular, Faure notes the esoteric perspective on the practice *nenbutsu* within the Matarajin cult.¹¹ As a specialist in “Esoteric Pure Land” thought in medieval Japan, I was excited to find this connection. However, I was curious about Faure’s suggestion that this may indicate Shingon influence on Tendai. Though there is very little scholarship on Esoteric Pure Land, in both English and Japanese, most of that scholarship has focused on thinkers associated with the Shingon tradition. However, my investigation into the confluence of this thing we call “Esoteric Buddhism” and this thing we call “Pure Land Buddhism” has revealed that not only were these two not really two throughout most of the history of East Asian Buddhism, it was in fact Tendai thinkers who formulated both

11. *Ibid.*, 323.

Esoteric Buddhism and Pure Land Buddhism and those areas where the two overlap. Shingon thinkers were as well participants in this Tendai dominated context, and worked to reorient their own understanding of the diversity of Mahāyāna Buddhist thought and practice around the cult of Kūkai. Perhaps in the case of Matarajin, Faure's assessment is correct. However, I offer a simple word of caution that when it comes to the relationship between Tendai and Shingon, the situation is rarely so simple as "A influencing B."

I have already benefitted greatly from these two fantastic volumes, and have already recommended these works to colleagues. I am very much looking forward to future volumes by Faure on the gods of medieval Japan.