

## Giving the Gods Their Due<sup>1</sup>

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Bernard Faure's *Gods of Medieval Japan*, thus far comprised of two volumes, *The Fluid Pantheon* and *Protectors and Predators*,<sup>2</sup> offers us an alternative understanding of divinity: "The name of a god does not designate a gathering or subsuming (of the multiple into unity), but a metamorphic deployment, a permanent onto/morpho-genesis."<sup>3</sup> In this deployment,

The relations between various deities are permitted or triggered by various features: iconographic, symbolic philosophical, numerological, etc. Everything can become relevant—all grist for the mill of symbolic thinking. The resources of analogical thought are truly mind-boggling.<sup>4</sup>

I have found only two brief reviews of this impressive pair of volumes: one, a brief notice in *Religious Studies Review* by Justin McDaniel,<sup>5</sup> and the other in *Japanese Studies* by Paul Swanson. Swanson does attempt to engage the challenge of these works—more on what the challenge is below—and asks the question I'm sure we have all wanted to ask: how did the author get permission to reprint all of these illustrations?"<sup>6</sup>

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1. This paper was given at the American Academy of Religion Annual Conference, Boston, MA, November 19, 2017.

2. 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).

3. Faure, *The Fluid Pantheon*, 38.

4. *Ibid.*, 30.

5. Justin Thomas McDaniel, *Religious Studies Review* 43, no. 2 (2017): 198.

6. Paul L. Swanson, review of *Gods of Medieval Japan, Vol. 1: The Fluid Pantheon*; and *Gods of Medieval Japan, Vol. 2: Protectors and Predators*, by Bernard Faure, *Japanese Studies* 37, no. 2 (2017): 279–280.

My initial sense of these volumes when I had only just flipped through them and dipped in here and there was that this effort was very much in the French tradition of the *Encyclopédie*. Certainly we are meeting in these volumes an attempt “to change the common way people think,” as Diderot once put it.<sup>7</sup> More proximate would be a comparison with *Hōbōgirin*.<sup>8</sup> My initial impression was wrong. Despite some of the *Hōbōgirin* articles hinting at what Faure is now attempting to do, that effort’s drive for comprehensiveness coupled with the encyclopedia format forces the gods into an alien, arbitrary, and procrustean framework antithetical to giving the gods their due.

The challenge of these volumes is not, from my perspective, that they are by turns fascinating and resistant to modern reading habits, or that the methodology is an eclectic mix of structuralism, deconstruction, and actor-network theory. Faure is well-aware of these difficulties and foregrounds them:

It is admittedly difficult, perhaps impossible, to follow the metamorphoses of the gods in the relatively linear discourse of a book. Books require a narrative, while reality offers no plots.<sup>9</sup>

Unlike an encyclopedic enterprise, Bernard Faure endeavors to trace connections, relationships, and flows. And again, just to remind us as we embark on the second volume,

I have been forced to proceed 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 the book unreadable).<sup>10</sup>

The challenge is that Faure wishes to take the gods seriously, and to do that we must entertain alternatives to purely scientific and historical thinking. Drawing on recent work exploring the agency of objects and “things,” Faure opens a door so that we might try to take up this challenge of according the gods a kind of agency:

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7. On the role of the *Encyclopédie* Diderot notes, “ce caractere est de changer la façon commune de penser.” “Encyclopédie” in Diderot, d’Alembert, et al., *Encyclopédie* vol. 5: 642A, consulted at <http://artflsrv02.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/philologic/getobject.pl?c.4:1252.encyclopedie0513> (accessed 9/14/2018).

8. *Hōbōgirin: Dictionnaire Encyclopédique du Bouddhisme d’après les Sources Chinoises et Japonaises* (Tokyo: Maison franco-japonaise, 1929–).

9. Faure, *The Fluid Pantheon*, 50.

10. Faure, *Protectors and Predators*, 7.

I do not see deities as mere social or cultural creations; or rather, I believe that, as “emergent properties,” they came to have their own agency—even if this agency was itself an effect “generated by a network of heterogeneous, interacting materials.”<sup>11</sup>

Both volumes begin with the same map—a kind of chart of filiation of the medieval Japanese gods. Each volume deals with a subset of the deities shown on the chart (I wonder, will further volumes correspond to portions of the chart left untouched in these two volumes?). Individual chapters—and the volumes as a whole—consist of methodological introductions and “codas” between which is sandwiched dense descriptive tracing of associations. Reading through the two volumes I found I often missed any overt methodological signposts as I followed the various traces and branching trails of association. Perhaps this was intentional—an attempt at weaning us of our modern obsessive-compulsive taxonomy disorder.

The two demons (or gods?) impelling this massive exploration are structuralism and what I would characterize as a kind of phenomenology—though one inflected by Bruno Latour’s actor/network theory and Tim Ingold’s meshwork theory.<sup>12</sup> Although mixed with other theoretical perspectives when these seem of use, it is a kind of point/counterpoint—almost a fugue—of the structural and the phenomenological.

At the beginning of the second volume, Faure says, describing his method in volume one:

I emphasized the presence of an *implicit* pantheon, a complex and active network that greatly differs from the official hierarchy as described by the *honji suijaku* model.... I contend that the implicit mythology...as well as certain recurring structures of Japanese mythical and ritual thought, are closer to real practices than official doctrine and mythology.<sup>13</sup>

Be that as it may, I would argue that the tactic illuminates by showing the shortcomings of the very notion of a stable “pantheon.”

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11. Faure, *The Fluid Pantheon*, 321.

12. For an interesting discussion of actor-network theory see Bruno Latour, “On Actor-Network Theory: A Few Clarifications,” *Soziale Welt* 47, H. 4 (1996): 369–381. For Tim Ingold see his *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge, and Description* (London & New York: Routledge, 2011).

13. Faure, *Protectors and Predators*, 11–12.

As I noted previously, Faure's approach is filtered through work by Bruno Latour and Tim Ingold and other recent explorations of material semiotics that seek to problematize our notions of agency. I often found myself thinking of these works as a kind of phenomenological excursion through medieval Japanese divinity. Faure brackets assumptions and abstract categories in a kind of Latourian "irreductionism," instead seeking to describe what "appears" to us and to following its traces. Latour's actor-network theory helps us to slip aside some of our prejudices and allow the gods a kind of agency within a network of connections with the various gods function as mediating nodes (when I talk about this in classes I describe the gods and temples as nodes in a social media network). Yet this still sociological approach to divine agency does not go so far as Tim Ingold's meshwork with its notions of organic fluidity. Ingold, citing Mol and Law, says,

In fluid space there are no well-defined objects or entities. There are rather substances that flow, mix and mutate, sometimes congealing into more or less ephemeral forms that can nevertheless dissolve or re-form without breach of continuity (ibid.: 659–664). Every line—every relation—in fluid space is a path of flow, like the riverbed or the veins and capillaries of the body.<sup>14</sup>

In like manner, near the end of volume one, Faure draws more on Ingold's meshwork than on Latour's networks: "The gods are only segments of a patterned, heterogeneous network or *meshwork* composed of myths and rituals, but also of human and divine bodies, objects, institutions, techniques, images, and feelings."<sup>15</sup>

Reading Faure has given me new eyes for Henri Doré's often maligned *Researches into Chinese Superstitions* (*Recherches sur les superstitions en Chine*).<sup>16</sup> In one of the most influential works of modern scholarship on Daoism and Chinese religions Kristofer Schipper says,

Leafing through the eighteen volumes of *Researches into Chinese Superstitions* by Father Heri Doré S. J. one cannot help but exclaim: "What a lot of gods!" ... [T]he explanations given by the Chinese converts...were recorded. Together with a commentary in which terms such as *superstition*, *vain observances*, and *harmful and useless beliefs*

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14. Ingold, *Being Alive*, 86.

15. Faure, *Protectors and Predators*, 317.

16. Henri Doré, *Recherches sur les superstitions en Chine*, 18 vols. (Chang-Hai: Imprimerie de la Mission catholique, 1911–1938).

occur over and over. But what stands out most...is the disjointed, incoherent aspect of his “researches.”<sup>17</sup>

I went back and poured through Doré’s volumes as an exercise in reflecting on Faure’s *Gods of Medieval Japan*. Certainly Doré’s massive compilation preserves much that is now lost, and certainly its organizing principles are not ours. But it is also evident that Doré, like Faure, was tracing relationships and associations in what he found. Look, for instance, at his treatment of written “charms” in volume three or his treatment of divination in volume four. How can we know that our efforts will not seem naïve and even deluded to those a century hence?

The one question I wish to raise is not meant as a criticism. Indeed, my point is not to criticize someone for not writing as I might have written. My question is a genuine question, as I have been working in medieval esoteric ritual manuals for some years now. Both *The Fluid Pantheon* and *Protectors and Predators* are works about the gods and their stories and their interaction with each other and with people. Ritual—both specific ritual and the notion in general—is, of course, frequently mentioned. Indeed, ritual appears repeatedly (though not in the indexes), and Faure says,

Scholars have been studying ritual in its concrete occurrences, but there is as yet no real *rito*-logy (as there is a *myth*-ology). Above all, there is no articulation between iconography and the ritual sphere to explain the way in which the “nature” of a god evolves according to encounters between images and symbols.<sup>18</sup>

What would this ritology look like? Would it be possible to take the same meshwork approach but focus more on the material mechanics of the divine-human encounter? Are the gods constituted by ritual meshworks (something Faure obviously touches on)? Of course Faure acknowledges that in his efforts he “merely propose[s] a reading...a mere hike among the multifarious ridges of Japanese religion.”<sup>19</sup> Now that I have accompanied him along this ridge I long to explore the ridge on the other side of the valley.

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17. Kristopher Schipper, *The Taoist Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 32; emphasis in original.

18. Faure, *The Fluid Pantheon*, 41.

19. *Ibid.*, 325.

