

## Spirit Possession as an Indigenous Religion in Japan and Okinawa

著者(英)	Kokan Sasaki
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## Spirit Possession as an Indigenous Religion in Japan and Okinawa

KOKAN SASAKI

### INTRODUCTION

This chapter deals with one form of magico-religious phenomena in Japan and in the Ryukyu Islands south of Japan, known as Seirei-Hyoi, "spirit possession". These occurrences are to be considered within the wider context of shamanistic beliefs and practices that maintain their socio-cultural meaning for contemporary Japanese. It is to illustrate the conspicuously animistic or "manaistic" character of Japanese folk religion that I have selected this topic. Spirit possession has persisted from very ancient times to the present day. It is prevalent among those who live in urban areas as well as in isolated settings [HORI 1968: 13-48].

Self appointed magico-religious specialists are adept at such related practices as exorcism, divination, interpretation of oracles or curing ceremonies. Many of these specialists deal with the troubles caused by spirits. Contact is established by becoming a medium or working with a medium who becomes possessed. These practices represent an animistic substratum of belief among the Japanese masses and is to be contrasted with the very sophisticated attitude toward religion found in other elements of Japanese society.

It is impressive to note that according to a recent report issued by the Headquarters of the Sōtō Zen Buddhism Sect [SATO 1978] among those who claim to belong to Sōtō Zen Buddhism are many who call on shamanic specialists called *Kitoshi* or *Gyoja* to gain mystical advice, rather than visiting a Zen temple to sit in meditation. For example, in Miyagi Prefecture, in the northeast, only 6.7% of the people who claimed to be Sōtō Zen Buddhists knew the names of the Buddha Sakyamuni or the two founders of their sect. Only 10.2% of them had any experience of sitting in Zazen. On the contrary, 71.5% know local shamans and 38.7% had visited a shaman. It is evident that local Japanese in their religious life keep contact with spirit possession as a continuity of animistic belief. Without understanding this continuity, it would be impossible to grasp the true continuity of expression of Japanese religious life.

### VARIETIES OF SPIRIT POSSESSION IN JAPAN

What is spirit possession? According to Professor Raymond Firth [1959],

“Spirit possession is a form of trance in which behaviour actions of a person are interpreted as evidence of a control of his behaviour by a spirit normally external to him.” This definition is brief and to the point and has been widely accepted; but, it is not without problem. This definition needs modification in order to apply it to Japanese phenomena. Generally speaking, all the conditions under which “spirit possession” is postulated by Japanese do not necessarily involve trance behavior. Frequently, for example, illness can be judged to be a form of possession; yet the possessed are far from being in trance [LEWIS 1971: 44–48].

Japan can be regarded as a country that manifests many unique kinds of spirit possession, constituting a very large and wide category of complicated phenomena. Let me cite a few typical examples to illustrate this:

### 1. Spirit Possession of Divine Priestesses

In the *Izaiho*, a grand festival, held on Kudaka Island, Okinawa every twelve years, all women above the age of thirty are expected to observe abstinence in a sacred forest called *Izaiyama* for four days and three nights, breaking off all relations with the outer world [SAKURAI 1980]. During this period it is believed that the novices staying in small improvised huts covered with holy leaves are visited by deities from the outer world. They are possessed by *Seji*, a divine spirit. They are, for the first time as divine priestesses, entitled to perform magico-religious rituals in order to enhance the prosperity and happiness of both their families and their communities. In this case, spirit possession takes place without evidence of trance.

Similarly in Japan proper, there are many magico-religious practitioners who are believed to possess some divine powers or spirits in themselves, or who are able to control directly mystical powers and spirits at will, although they never go into trance states when they perform rituals. Perhaps, this may be the reason why in Japan it is very difficult contextually to distinguish between a priest and shaman or “spirit medium”.

### 2. Shamanic Spirit Possession

Generally speaking, there are two ways of becoming a shaman reported in modern Japan. One is through divine calling and the other by selfsearching. In the former case, a person gradually or suddenly begins to suffer from mental and physical abnormality frequently accompanied by visual and auditory hallucinations as well as trances and special dreams. At first, she (females being predominant) visits doctors or hospitals but the sufferer comes to believe that her abnormality cannot be diagnosed nor treated. She then calls on a shaman to determine whether her abnormality is physical in nature or the result of divine influence involving spirit possession. If the cause of her abnormal condition is found related to the supernatural, usually she is instructed to take one of the following ways to free herself from her sufferings:

- a. Exorcism by a shaman
- b. Restoration of a lost soul through the aid of a shaman

- c. Becoming a shaman herself in accordance with divine will
- d. Postponement of shamanization through the supplication of the supernatural

It goes without saying that if a person who is suffering from a critical affliction caused by divine calling accepts the divine will and becomes a shaman, her abnormality will gradually disappear. In this case, those who are physically handicapped, especially the blind, usually apprentice themselves to local senior shamans, often on the advice of their families so that they can establish themselves as shamanic mediums. Under senior shamans, they generally spend two or three years learning how to become a shaman. The most important thing they have to learn is how to find their tutelary spirits while they are in trance. After two or three years of apprenticeship, they become qualified to participate in a ritual called *Kamitsuke*, a ritual in which they may be possessed by a divine spirit. In this ritual, when the person concerned falls into a state of mental dissociation, the senior shamans ask them by what kind of god they are possessed. The god reveals its name through their mouths. This god is hereafter thought to be their tutelary spirit, helping them in their shamanic activities when necessary.

### 3. Spirit Possession in Everyday Life

Although the Japanese of today enjoy an advanced standard of civilization, their belief systems and practices still reveal a deeply rooted tradition of indigenous religion, including spirit possession. In ordinary speech Japanese will often use expressions such as "I am possessed today" or "You are now possessed" whenever they happen to have good luck or success. On the contrary, if they make mistakes or are unlucky, they will say, "I am not possessed today" or "You are not possessed now". Although the original conscious meaning of these expressions has been lost, the logic still manifest in these expressions suggests that it is due to a possessing spirit, that the person concerned finds good fortune, or that it is because of the loss of a helping spirit that he has experienced a sudden reverse. Although I have been describing possession as a "spirit", spirit is merely a hypothetical term. It is very difficult for us to decide at this stage of research whether the possessing entity *Tsukimono* is "anima", a spirit, or "mana", a magical power.

Let me cite here a few examples of spirit possession which I have collected in my field work:

- a. A junior high school boy in Tokyo was ill with a slight fever. His mother took him to a national hospital. A doctor diagnosed his case as influenza, and gave him medication; he took it, but showed no improvement. He visited the hospital numerous times but still showed no signs of recovery. His parents became impatient, for their son was preparing for the entrance examination of a senior high school. Due to the insistent advice of his grandmother, his parents finally made up their minds to take their son to a medium living in the downtown section of the city. The medium, in trance, suggested that the boy has been possessed by *Inari*, identified as the fox-god of a small neighborhood shrine.

She exorcised the god from him by waving the *Gohei*, a sacred staff to which are attached cut white paper strips. Soon thereafter, he recovered. It is important here to note how the traditional concept of spirit possession and exorcism has been transmitted from grandmother to the parents and now further to the son. It must also be noted how *Inari* is a Shinto concept only vaguely understood by most Japanese. In some versions of belief the fox is simply a messenger of an agricultural fertility deity or deities.

- b. A fisherman in Goto, Nagasaki suddenly one day while he was fishing aboard a ship felt his whole body being oppressed by some heavy object. A doctor, who diagnosed him, said that he had no physical ailments at all. However, in the Goto District, such a personal condition is interpreted as the "Meeting with the Bad Wind" or "Possession by the Wind". It is said that the "wind" in this context means the influence of the spirit of some person who died at sea or the spirit of Yako, a wild fox. The fisherman called on a *Honin*, or shaman, who gave him a divine message saying that he met with the spirit of a dead person at sea. In accordance with the advice of the specialist, he propitiated the dead spirit, offering rice, fish, fruit and vegetables on an alter which was prepared for it. Soon his abnormal condition disappeared.
- c. In villages one still finds that a certain family is regarded by the villagers as a possessor of the spirit of some specific animal—a fox, or dog or other imaginary beast. Members of the concerned family are the object of fear and contempt, and endure various forms of discrimination. For example, in a village of Tokunoshima, a certain family is looked upon as the possessor of the dog spirit which is considered by the villagers to have been inherited through the family line. It is believed that if another family were to bring in a daughter from this possessed family, they too would become possessed. Therefore, this family tends to be avoided, especially in respect to marital relations. While it is considered possible for a possessed person to have a spirit expelled by exorcism, it is impossible for a possessed family to chase away a possessing spirit because liberation from spirit possession means the abolition of the family itself. A family regarded as a possessor of spirits is often a family who has migrated into a village later than most of the other families but, by some chance of fortune, has become wealthier than their neighbors. The villagers interpret that when a socially vulnerable family becomes wealthy and successful it is due to spirit possession. It is quite clear that concepts of spirit possession may be used to explain certain dualities in the Japanese view of life, i.e., rich and poor, good and ill health, success and failure, etc.

### SOCIO-CULTURAL MEANINGS OF SHAMANIC SPIRIT POSSESSION

Although there are other types of spirit possession to be found, I would like to focus upon "shamanic" spirit possession especially in regard to its socio-cultural meaning. As I have already observed, every form of possession is not always accompanied by trance, and it is obvious that all manifestations of spirit possession will not necessarily involve a personality change in the change from human nature to

incarnate spirit. In this regard, I can agree with Professor Firth's definition concerning spirit mediumship and spirit possession. He describes that, "...in both, a person's actions are believed to be dictated by an extra-human entity which has 'entered' his body or otherwise 'affected' him" [FIRTH 1969]. On the basis of his definition, we can consider that spirit possession has two different spiritual functions: one is the spirit's entrance or intrusion, and the other is its affection or influence. In the former, a spirit which has entered (possessed) a person will speak in the first person through his mouth. In the latter, however, a person who has been affected (possessed) by a spirit may speak in the second person, in his own words but in accordance with the inspirations sent by the spirit. It seems possible for most Japanese shamans to contact (directly) the supernaturals by either means.

Recently, anthropologists tend to characteristically distinguish between spirit mediums and prophets. It is pointed out that while a spirit medium uses "oratio recta" (direct narration), a prophet uses "oratio obliqua" (indirect narration); therefore, we can see that Japanese shamans are ordinarily mediumistic as well as prophetic in character because they can speak the words of the dead using direct narration or they can give divine messages by means of indirect narration.

One can explain the socio-cultural meaning of shamanic initiation by examining "divine calling". As I have already described, the first symptoms of shamanization usually begin in various personal abnormalities, e.g., decrease in appetite, severe palpitations of the heart, sleeplessness, fatigue and gradual loss of weight. These physical symptoms are apt to be accompanied by mental disturbances, e.g., visions, hallucinations, and dreams in which appear strange and uncanny men wearing *Hakui*, a white Japanese ceremonial kimono. In Okinawa, people who are suffering from such abnormalities are sure to be suspected by their families as being victims of *Kamidari*, a trouble caused by gods or spirits. *Kamidari* is considered as one form of spirit possession because the concerned persons have been put in a state of bondage by the gods and spirits. The gods and spirits often visit in visions or in dreams, show them the gods in heaven, ancient Kings and Queens, or bring them to divine heavenly palaces or ancestral graveyards. Sometimes they urge a form of spirit marriage. It is customary for a prospect to visit a *Yuta*, a shamanic medium, to get advice concerning the contents of their mysterious experience. If the cause of the abnormal condition is made clear by the *Yuta*, then they must follow the advice of the *Yuta* in order to recover; and, if the supernaturals want them to become *Yuta*, they must consent. The more resistance they show to becoming *Yuta*, the more aggravating will be their *Kamidari*. Thus they must pay numerous visits to the *Yuta* to learn how to use spirit possession and inspiration in seances. It is also believed that they can be instructed directly by the supernaturals in further visions or in trances. Okinawans eagerly anticipate the birth of a *Kaminoko*, child of god, and gather at the house of anyone possessed. It is quite likely that someone considered possessed would eventually become celebrated as a shaman.

What kind of person becomes a shaman? Those who have come to suffer from *Kamidari* have experienced some critical affliction beforehand, such as sudden death

in the family, divorce, a husband's fickleness, a sudden change in environment, extreme poverty, failure, prolonged illness or bad physical health from an unknown cause [LEBRA 1974: 111; OHASHI 1980]. Susceptible individuals, helpless in their distress will gradually begin to show symptoms of *Kamidari*. As previously mentioned, the Japanese often believe that good and bad fortune is somehow related to the world of the supernatural; therefore, it should be quite easy for those meeting personal adversity to attribute their condition to supernatural causes. Needless to say, this belief is constantly strengthened by the *Yuta*. *Kamidari* is sometimes called *Kamigurui*, "divine insanity". Thus, having been made insane by the gods and spirits a person meeting adversity will be able to readapt to society without actually becoming considered insane in secular terms. Speaking broadly, spirit possession in this sense may be considered as having the important function of dissolving personal frustration and, at the same time, maintaining social order. Some examples, which I have collected, will be cited here to make clear cause and effect in spirit possession.

- a. A housewife troubled with extreme poverty for a number of years, fell into a state of "possession". She had no appetite and grew thin and weak. Every night she dreamed a strange dream in which a nobleman or a woman dressed in gorgeous costumes appeared. She went to a shaman who told her that her ancestors were of a noble family in the Ryukyu Dynasty, and she was expected to become a shaman. She is now a rich *Yuta* and when she performs rituals, wears elaborate costumes which were peculiar to the nobility during the Ryukyu Dynasty. It is clear that this woman has been able to realize symbolically in possession and her profession as a shaman what she could not obtain in ordinary family life.
- b. A housewife suddenly started to show symptoms of divine insanity when she learned that her husband was keeping a concubine. From early in the morning, she began trancelike dancing, loudly crying out prayers and strongly beating a drum. Her husband who ran a grocery store was forced to close his shop due to her behavior. He visited a shaman and learned that she was possessed by the spirit of her paternal ancestress who was also a shaman. She became a medium by using her ancestral spirit as a tutelary spirit. Soon her husband left his concubine. This case shows that the spirit possession of a housewife can symbolize both her strong antagonism against her husband's sexual conduct and, by sanctioned disruption, bring to bear heavy pressure upon him. Here spirit possession becomes a communally condoned moral sanction. There are many similar examples cited in various parts of Japan.
- c. A seventeen-year-old girl from an isolated island came to a big city, and lived in her paternal uncle's house as a maid. After two months, she became afflicted with an undiagnosed illness. At about five o'clock in the morning she used to be haunted by a vision of an old man with white hair and beard, dressed in a white kimono. This old man, whom she believed to be a god, ordered her to go to shrines and holy forests, etc. If she denied his order, she was struck by intense pain, and felt as if her whole body were being struck by innumerable

needles. When she set about to obey his orders, her pain soon disappeared. She came to understand why she was suffering from this unknown illness when a shaman, by divine message, told her that she too was destined to become a shaman. She entreated the god to postpone the time to become a shaman for three years. Her affliction was then lessened but she had to visit a shrine daily [SASAKI 1978]. This example demonstrates how belief in the spirit possession of a young girl functions to transform personal maladjustment into a means of changing her relationship to her paternal uncle's family.

We can learn from such examples that the persons concerned have first sublimated their present stressful condition by attributing it to the work of gods, and secondly achieved forms of personal liberation from their conditions by "obeying the will" of the gods. Thus, it follows that, "...the link between affliction and its cure as the royal road to the assumption of the shamanistic vocation is thus plain enough in those societies where shamans play the main or major role in religion and where possession is highly valued as a religious experience" [LEWIS 1971: 70]. In this sense, Japanese society and culture can be said to still give evidence of the saliency of belief in possession as characteristic.

#### SPIRIT POSSESSION IN WOMEN

How should we interpret the fact that in Japan those possessed by gods and spirits are, for the most part, women? In Japanese folk beliefs, women are considered more easily possessed or influenced by the supernatural than are men. It is mostly women who are positively concerned with both Buddhist and Shintoist services or rituals in mainland Japan; but it is in Okinawa that one finds the closest relation between women and the supernatural.

There are such expressions in Okinawa as "Seji (Shiji) Dakai" (meaning spiritually strong) or "Seidaka Umari" (meaning to be endowed with divine character). Such expressions are most likely to be applied to women, not to men. Those who are destined to become *Yuta* or exhibit *Kamidari* are commonly the women who are *Sejidakai* or of *Seidaka Umari*.

The *Sejidakai* woman is regarded as one who has been endowed with far stronger and higher spiritual or magical power than common Okinawan women who have also been given spiritual character by nature. In Okinawa the status of women generally has remained higher than in mainland Japan. Okinawan personality and culture was much less influenced by feudalism than mainland Japan (c.f. [HARING 1953, 1956]). In Okinawa, it is only the women who can mediate between the supernatural and human beings either in their immediate family or in *Monchu* (a kind of patrilineal descent group). They are expected to be much more acquainted with religious matters than are the men.

There is a kind of division of labor in Okinawan society in that the women are to be concerned with sacred matters and the men are to be concerned with secular pur-



suits. Women have been trained from infancy to be sensitive to magico-religious events including ancestor worship.

Usually, it is women who are very sensitive in regard to how to build graves, how to worship the ancestral tablets and how to deal with gods. It is they who believe that ghosts and ancestor spirits are very influential in what happens to their descendants, and are sure to bring grief and disaster upon them if they fail to deal properly with them. In this sense, spirit possession is recognized as a sign of supernatural desire as well as dissatisfaction. It is the women who observe various festivals for their families or *Monchus* in accordance with ancestral ways dating back to more remote ages. If they cannot satisfy their dead or ancestor spirits, the family order, the *Monchu*, and even the village might be destroyed by their wrath. Thus, women's magico-religious status and their expected role behavior are said to provide for the safety of Okinawan society.

In Okinawan society a dependence on religio-cultural beliefs makes it easy to attribute mental and physical abnormalities to supernatural causes. Moreover, Okinawans are apt to suffer from supernatural abnormalities when they are confronted with persistent grief or sudden disaster.

At one period in ancient Japan, it was the men who carried on secular government but with the spiritual assistance of their wives. There are recorded instances found both in the ancient dynasties of the mainland and in Okinawa. Referring to *Himiko*, a shaman queen of ancient Japan, Professor Hori stated, "It seems to me important that this highly shamanic and charismatic girl was enthroned in order to meet a social crisis presumably caused by civil war in a transitional period of revolutionary political, economic, social and cultural change at the juncture of the Yayoi and Kofun Periods" [HORI 1968: 191].

It is clear in the tradition of Japanese shamanism from ancient times that the women were considered more easily susceptible to symptoms of mental and physical abnormalities whenever they met a personal or family crisis.

## CONCLUSION

Belief in spirit possession remains present in Japanese life in both abstract and concrete terms. It continues to be part of, not only a solid substratum in Japanese religion generally, but also serves as a strong constituent of many so-called new religions in Japan. The Japanese visit Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines as public believers and devotees but, at the same time, they privately visit spirit mediums in order to obtain divine information concerning problems in their daily lives. Some people even say that while Buddhism and Shintoism are the religions of the *Omote*, "the front", spirit possession and shamanism remain the religions of the *Ura*, "the back". Actually, in a variety of situations, both religions are found to be complementary in function. In various parts of the country funerals are being performed by the cooperation of both Buddhist priests and shamanic mediums. While the former ceremony supposedly leads the soul of the dead to the other world, the latter

can, upon occasion, bring it back to this world. There are even cases reported where the husband functions as a Buddhist priest and his wife as a shamanic medium. It is well-known that many founders of new religions in Japan are conspicuously shamanic in character. The founders of such big religious associations as Tenrikyo, Omotokyo and the Rissho-koseikai are regarded as typical female shamans who had experienced violent forms of spirit possession.

As an important element of indigenous religion in Japan we must not overlook the worship of those dead who manifested some particular form of power. According to Professor Noboru Miyata [1970] Japanese worship of human beings is two-fold: that of the powerful living and that of the powerful dead. He cites in his book many interesting examples of how living persons regarded as being possessed by abnormal qualities including spirits have been deeply respected and worshipped. I think that the worship of and belief in living persons as gods included the Emperor and the various founders of new religions. Such beliefs have to be discussed in connection with Japanese belief in spirit possession and shamanism. Furthermore, I must add here that the worship of living persons might have a close connection with the animistic worship of nature which includes the worship of mountains, oceans, animals etc. Many Japanese have trained themselves on holy mountains or turned to the sea, where they sought to find the power of the supernatural. Thus we can contend that spirit possession, the worship of human beings, and the worship of nature are mutually interrelated in Japanese thought and constitute the basic elements of Japanese indigenous religion.

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