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Grammars and Morphologies of Ritual Practices in Asia

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The Contested Space of Buddhist Public Rituals

The *shunie* of Tōdaiji

Shunie 修二会, literally "liturgical assemblies of the second month", were among the most important public rituals (*hōe* 法会) performed in Buddhist temples in pre-modern Japan. These liturgies took their name from the period in which they were originally held, the second month of the lunar calendar, and in their simplest meaning may be described as exorcistic rituals performed at the beginning of the year, which centred on repentance (*keka* 悔過). Repentance was understood as an action that benefitted not only the individual who carried it out, but also the community at large. Celebrant-monks, by repenting committed offences, amend their errors and, thanks to this, bring public benefits, such as peace for the entire country and wealth and well-being for the populace. Significantly, Buddhist repentance in Japan was not conceived as a mental process of individual awareness, but was enacted as a set of ritual actions, including bodily movements, melodic chanting and recitations. One may indeed speak of a ritualisation of repentance.

While many of the pre-modern assemblies have disappeared from the liturgical calendar of temples and shrines, *shunie* are today still performed annually in temples of the Nara area. The foremost examples are those held at Yakushiji 薬師寺, popularly known as "the flower ceremony" (*hanaeshiki* 花会式), and those at Tōdaiji 東大寺, celebrated as the liturgy of "drawing the water" (*omizutori* お水取り). Whether they have been reinstated recently, as in the case of Yakushiji, or have been performed continuously for centuries, as at Tōdaiji, they are presented as ancient rituals, endorsed by mythological narratives that legitimise the temple in which they are performed, and maintaining the format and function they had in the past. In this sense, *shunie* constitute an extraordinary focus to explore the significance of ritual continuity in a Buddhist institutional context, and the actual changes that a representative ritual underwent historically. At the same time, their scale and complexity provide grounds to analyse the multiple agency inherent in ritual practice, and the layered religious, liturgical, and social implications of performance *qua* ritualised production.

The interest in public assemblies has grown in recent years among Japanese historians, and a good deal of research has been published in Japanese. Surprisingly,

however, these liturgies have hitherto not been the object of much attention in Western scholarship. This study focuses on the *shunie* conducted at Tōdaiji. In order to understand how the ritual came to be formulated in the shape we have today, I shall first sketch the origin of the second-month assembly in the context of the historical evolution of non-esoteric Buddhist ceremonies. Then I shall outline the protocol of the liturgy held at Tōdaiji, and explore the performative aspects of some ritual segments. While I refer to the discursive narratives on mythological and symbolic themes that the ritual has produced, my main concern is the enactment of the ritual in specific movements, sounds, and settings, and the distinct groups of actors and sponsors for whom the ritual yields meaning and empowerment. These elements, in fact, reveal how the ritual has been constructed as a complex but regulated space, where different dynamics are at work at the same time.

The Development of Public Repentance Liturgies

Scholars have suggested that the establishment of large-scale Buddhist liturgical assemblies was affected by the interaction of three socio-religious factors: the type of prayers addressed to a deity to fulfil specific wishes; the use of distinctive media to request divine intervention, such as reading and chanting; and the status of the petitioners.

Textual evidence shows that the performance of repentance rituals goes back to the second half of the seventh century (the term *keka* is already attested in the *Nihon shoki*). Thus repentance may well have been the basic form that Buddhist rituals took when they were introduced and systematised in Japan under the influence of practices witnessed in Tang China. However, the content, structure, and function of these early ceremonies greatly differed from later *shunie*. As a matter of fact, contemporaneous sources do not emphasise the centrality of the act of repenting in front of the buddhas. The rituals carried out in the large Nara temples sponsored by the state consisted in decorating the statues of the main deity (a buddha, a bodhisattva, or the Four Heavenly Kings) and inviting a large number of monks to read sutras. The aim of the assembly was propitiatory and apotropaic: praying for rain or to stop rain, preventing illness (of the king), and avoiding disasters and epidemics that affected the country at large. Repentance was not perceived as the direct cause of the benefit requested, but as an auxiliary element, the step that preceded the actual ritual. Reciting sutras (which exploited the magical power of the scriptures) or the names of the buddhas (which relied on the power of veneration, and of the deity venerated) was considered to be equally efficacious in delivering benefits. Yet historical records also point out a number of elements that would be developed in medieval *shunie*. One closely related to the act of repenting offences is the purity of body and mind of the practitioners. Interestingly, such status was extended to the people who attended the ritual and were its beneficiaries.

Not only monks, but also lay people and patrons undertook an ascetic regime, abstaining from drink and eating meat, in order to attain a pure heart. The success of the ritual was thus understood as the outcome of the joint effort of monks and laymen. A second crucial element is the recitation of sutras and spells at night, in a loud voice and with an unusual rhythm.[1]

The formal structure of the repentance assemblies became more defined from the mid-eighth century, when the ceremonies started being classified according to the deity to whom they were dedicated (*Yakushi keka*, *Amida keka*, *Kichijō keka*). Invoking these deities by chanting their names (*shōmyō keka* 称名悔過) became a core part of the ritual, and a special style of Buddhist melodic chanting (*shōmyō* 声明), which had reached Japan around that time, was introduced into the liturgy. This move indicates the extent to which public ceremonies were susceptible to new religious fashions and apt to absorb them. At the same time, ascetic practices of purification became central to the liturgy and the means to (rather than preparation for) the fulfilment of the prayers. Sutra reading and repentance thus became a set, the two terms of a combined liturgy, which would become the model for non-esoteric Buddhist ritual practices. These two elements, however, remained differentiated in terms of their spatio-temporal performance. Sutras were read, usually in *tendoku* 転読, during the daytime periods. Repentance, in the form of invocative repentance (*raisan* 礼懺), and recitations of spells, took place during the night sections. After the ninth century such distinctions would be formalised in a two-period pattern (*niji* 二時) adopted by many *hōe*. Even assemblies, such as the Tōdaiji *shunie*, with a more complex six-period structure shaped by the traditional six divisions of the day (*rokuji* 六時), would maintain a clear differentiation between day and night segments.[2] This feature was further reflected in the institution of two main celebrants in charge of different ritual protocols: the master of spells (*shushi* 呪師) and the master of recitations (*daidōshi* 大道師).

At the end of the tenth century, ludic elements were added to the ceremonies, aimed at the entertainment of a lay audience. *Shunie* were established in this context, together with another type of public ritual held at New Year, called *shushōe* 修正会.[3] These new types of assemblies were held at night, and included artistic performances between two nightly segments, which concluded with the appearance of demons on the temple stage. This evolution was part of a religio-political move that used the rituals as didactic occasions to teach Buddhism to the lay people who

1 Satō 2002b: 6–10.

2 On the two patterns see Satō 1994: 2–10. *Sanbōe no kotoba*, for instance, attests that during the *misaie*, assemblies that lasted for seven days and nights, lectures on the *Saishōōkyō* took place in the daytime, while repentances devoted to Kichijōten were staged at night.

3 These two terms appear for the first time in a document related to the Tendai abbot Ryōgen, dated 970. It is here recorded that the chase of demons and the "rite of the ox-seal" were performed at the end of a twenty-seven day liturgy. Satō 2002b.

attended the performances. It was influenced by political changes, as temples were set free from the protection and control that had regulated their activities under the Ritsuryō system and gave new directions to their practices.[4] Today's *shunie* have maintained and exploited their ludic aspect, and indeed are mostly known for it. The *hanaeshiki* of Yakushiji still closes with a chasing of demons (*onioishiki* 鬼追い式).[5] This finale caters to a "ludic catharsis" of the audience, which is at once entertainment and soteriological enactment.

In the eleventh century *shunie* became part of the liturgical calendar (*nenjū gyōji* 年中行事) of Buddhist institutions, and the period of their performance was fixed. They were also exported to major provincial shrines, playing a crucial role in the acceptance of Buddhism in the countryside. They in fact replicated the aims of the original state assemblies (good harvest, prevention of disease and peace for the entire country), thus functioning to integrate local and "national" concerns.

The "Omizutori" of Tōdaiji: Ritual Protocol

The second-month assembly of Tōdaiji is performed at Nigatsudō 二月堂, the hall in the upper precinct of the temple complex, which takes its name from the ceremony itself. The liturgy is dedicated to Eleven-headed Kannon 十一面観音, the *honzon* 本尊 of Nigatsudō, and is performed for an extended period of time, nowadays from 28 February to 15 March.[6] Both the temple and the city of Nara

4 Uejima 2004: 234–236.

5 Fieldwork, April 2005. Today, the Yakushiji assembly is carried out for seven days, between the end of March and the beginning of April. On the last day of the liturgy (4/4), after the monks have concluded the rites of repentance inside the Main Hall (which can be attended only by a very limited number of people), the scene moves onto a platform built outside the hall, in front of a larger public. Performers dressed as demons appear on the stage, supplied with torches, and are chased away by the spells of the Heavenly King Bishamon, who walks around the stage in an unusual manner. An excellent recording of the ritual is the video produced by the National Museum of Japanese History (2007). I am grateful to Matsuo Kōichi for providing me with a copy.

6 A complete record of the ritual may be found in Tōkyō kokuritsu bunkazai kenkyūjo 1975. A recent paperback volume offers a comprehensive guide to the ceremonies (Satō 2009). There are several studies of the *omizutori*, including Horiike 1985; Gangōji bunkazai kenkyūjo 1979; Nantō bukkyō kenkyūkai 1984; and the extensive works of Satō Michiko (Satō 1994 and 2002). The medieval illustrated origin story *Nigatsudō engi* provides important visual representations of the pre-modern ritual. Other, more recent media products include two *shōmyō* recordings (Victor Entertainment 1971 & Kingu recodo 1997), and a documentary video (Shogakukan 2003). Transcriptions and studies of the chants are also available (Tōdaiji 2004). No scholarly analysis of the liturgy exists in English (Boyer & Fujiyoshi 1970 is a short introductory description), but in French there is an excellent study based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the nineteen-seventies (Berthier 1981). The analysis of the present paper has benefited from the fieldwork I conducted at Nigatsudō in February–March

advertise it as a magnificent ritual of water and fire that marks the start of spring. The spectacular nightly interludes, when huge burning torches (*taimatsu* 松明) are carried up to the front gallery of Nigatsudō, illuminating the clear winter skies, are pre-eminent in the public perception of the ritual (Image 1). From this perspective, the climax of the ritual is reached two nights before the conclusion of the assembly, when eleven torches weighing more than sixty kilos each are whirled around on the hall balcony, producing a rain of blessed fire over the audience. Today this spectacle attracts thousands of spectators from all over Japan, yet few of the visitors are aware of the actions that take place in the hall before and after such extravaganzas.

Image 1: *Taimatsu* burning in the night
Photo by the author

The *omizutori* is in fact a very complex ritual of repentance. It is divided into two distinct sections, a nine-day preparatory retreat, and the public liturgy proper.

2009. I would like to thank Kojima Yasuko, a specialist in medieval Japanese culture, for sharing her knowledge of the ritual, and making time to accompany me, providing practical information, introductions, and occasionally a blanket for the cold nights.

The first stage is an indispensable period of purification, known as *bekka* 別火 (lit. "different fire"), in which participating clerics observe a regime of vegetarianism and eat food prepared exclusively (i.e. on a different fire) for them. The retreat serves for the practitioners, who are called *rengyōshū* 練行衆, lit. "those who cultivate ascesis", to prepare themselves and the ritual goods to be used during the liturgy. They make the paper flowers that decorate the altar, the straw mats that they will use in the inner hall, and their ritual clothing and footwear, consisting of a white papier-mâché dress and wooden clogs covered by paper.[7] They practise chanting and conch-shell blowing in their own lodgings first, and in a building located within the Kaidanin 戒壇院 compounds during the second part of the retreat, when the ascetic regime becomes stricter, and they are forbidden to speak to each other or go out of the lodging. The public liturgies begin on the evening of 28 February. On this day the clerics move to a building located at the foot of Nigatsudō (*sanrō shukusho* 参籠宿所), which becomes their secluded lodging for the duration of the assembly. The first segments of the ritual are acts of physical and spiritual purification: the practitioners take a ritual bath (Image 2), receive a blessing in the form of a Shinto exorcism (*Ōnakatomi harae* 大中臣祓) performed by the master of spells (Image 7), and are administered the precepts (*jūkai* 授戒) in the dining hall next to their lodging. They then ascend to Nigatsudō. The inner sanctuary is unlocked and the main lay assistant (*dōdōji* 堂童子) makes a new fire (*ittokubi* 一徳火) to light the "eternal lamp" offered to Kannon, which will be kept burning until the following year (Image 12).

Every day the practising clerics ascend to Nigatsudō twice, for the daytime services (Image 3) and the longer evening services. (For the evening ascent their attendants carry the huge pine torches.) The liturgy revolves around two basic ritual actions. One is the recitation of the holy name of Kannon accompanied by prostrations and other acts of veneration. The second is the recitation of sutras and other texts accompanied by fast movements inside the inner hall (walking, running). At sunset the Amida sutra is also recited in a separate room of the hall. During the liturgical period the practitioners take only one ritual meal a day, at noon, and are forbidden to eat and drink until the end of the daily observances in the middle of the night, when they can have some rice gruel. Maintaining such an ascetic regime empowers them and legitimises their practice.

The ritual is supported by auxiliary practices, which are not connected with repentance and thus are not part of the daily protocol, but are staged only once during the assembly. The most important of these is perhaps the ceremony of "drawing sacred water" from the well at the bottom of Nigatsudō, which gives the second-

7 For examples see the catalogue of the special exhibition held during the *shunie* in Nara (Nara National Museum 2006: 59).

Image 2: Practitioners exiting from the ritual bath
Photo by the author

Image 3: Ascent to Nigatsudō
Photo by the author

month assembly its popular name. It is performed during the night of 12 March, and takes the form of a kami ritual, with all its symbolic apparatus (Image 4). The scented water (*kōsui* 香水) drawn from the sacred well is poured into two wooden buckets, and mixed with water drawn in past rituals. It is used as an offering to Kannon, and is also given to the public that attends the liturgy.

Another noteworthy auxiliary practice is the so-called "outing of the small Kannon" (*ko Kannon shutsugyo* 小観音出御), in which a small image of Kannon, placed in a Shinto palanquin (*mikoshi* 神輿), is brought into the prayer hall and is venerated in turn by each of the practitioners (Image 5). This is the only occasion on which high-ranking clerics of Tōdaiji officially attend the liturgy. Remarkable is also the presence of the head priest (*gūji* 宮司) of the nearby Tamukeyama Hachiman shrine 手向山八幡宮, who acts as a warden of the sacred image by remaining seated next to the altar throughout the rite, thus symbolically evoking the protective role of Hachiman.[8] The Shinto flavour of such auxiliary practices serves as a reminder of the significance of associative (*shinbutsu* 神仏) practices, even within essentially Buddhist rituals such as that of repentance.

Performance: Sounds, Movements, Silence

The protocol of the *shunie* thus unfolds through segments that are diversified in terms of spatial setting and type of ritual action. Dramatic effects are produced by privileging darkness over light, and the use of symbolic material such as fire and water. Such effects are amplified by the interaction of what we may consider the basic elements of performance, sound and movement.

The two major liturgists mark two different performative modes, which have coexisted and fed into each other, but at the same time seem to be constructed contrastively to give rhythm to the liturgy. The master exorcist's words and gestures are mystifying and incomprehensible. He leads what we can define as the esoteric part of the ritual. He makes mudras and mantras and reads dharani. His function is to call upon the guardian deities of the place of practice and to build the sacred boundaries (*kekkai* 結界) that protect the ritual space. He rings bells, makes utterances in a loud voice, and moves around "noisily", stamping on the floor with his wooden clogs and running. The other main liturgist (*daidōshi*), who is in charge of the exoteric side of the ritual, leads the recitative segments while sitting or walking naturally. He pronounces the inaugural statement of purpose (*kaibyaku* 開白) and intones the melodic chanting that takes place at the beginning and end of the night, using his voice in a more conventional way. The performance of the two leading images thus alternates between slow and fast action, focusing on symbolic move-

8 Satō 1984.

Image 4: Procession to the sacred well
Photo by the author

Image 5: Venerating the small Kannon
Photo by the author

ments of the body and of the voice with one, while focusing with the other on a gifted transmission of textual words to the audience.

Perhaps because the most significant liturgical sequences take place in the dark, sound (or absence of sound) plays a remarkable role in the perception and appreciation of the ritual. Of the different sounds that emerge from inside the inner hall, the voices engaged in uttering, singing, and reciting "texts" (sutras or other "reading matter", such as lists of names) express each liturgical element in a different mode, allowing the audience outside the hall to divide the phases of the ritual into exoteric and esoteric, and the deities venerated into buddhas and other gods.[9] In some sections, words and vocal sounds are emitted in a forceful way that is not heard in temples, except on the occasion of special ascetic practices. In others, the litanies of the name of Kannon are pronounced with an accelerating rhythm, progressively abbreviating the formula *namu Kanjisa bosatsu* (Praise to the Bodhisattva Kannon) to *namu Kanjiza*, *namu Kan*, and then only *Kan*, repeated at an almost delirious speed. With such vocal segments other actions are juxtaposed, which enhance the opposite effect, that of no sound. This is the case of a circumambulatory practice where the practitioners takes off their clogs, lift up their ritual robes, and start running around the altar without producing any sound (*hashiri no gyōhō* 走りの行法). Legend says that it reproduces the way in which the initiator of the ritual, Jitchū 実忠, saw the repentance conducted by saintly beings in the Tuṣita heaven.[10] This silent performance is interrupted only by a clean, sharp stroke on a wooden plank. This is the sound of a distinctive type of prostration called *gotai tōchi* 五体投地, which takes place in the outer hall. The practitioner throws himself down with all the weight of his body onto a long plank placed in the middle of the outer hall (*gotai no ita* 五体の板), while at the same time touching five parts of his body simultaneously (Image 6). This prostration is executed also during the daily segments of the liturgy. It is a difficult exercise that has to be acted out to perfection to avoid a broken knee. It proves that performative repentance, in so far as it consists in corporeal ascetic acts, implies readiness and virtuosity. Thus the practitioners' movements become forms of bodily enunciation that do not necessarily refer to a scriptural text, but equally define the ritual space as sacred by virtue of their empowered gestures.

9 See Abe 2005, in particular the diagrams on p. 133. On the function of the voice in constructing the sacred see Abe 2001.

10 The origin story recounts that to re-enact the divine ritual, Jitchū had to accelerate the circumambulations, since one day and one night in the Tuṣita heaven corresponded to four hundred years in the world of mortals. This silent run takes place on the last two nights of the first seven-day period (5–6 March) and the last three nights of the second seven-day period (12–14 March).

Image 6: Five-touch repentance (*gotai tōchi*)
Photo by the author

Attuning the kami: Music, Stillness, and Declamation

In striking contrast with the melodic chanting that is carried out inside the inner hall, ritual segments that reiterate kami worship or are patterned after a Shinto mode (and which take place outside the inner hall) are marked out by music that is associated with shrines and court rituals, *gagaku* 雅楽. This music is played along the steps of Nigatsudō during the procession that goes to draw sacred water, as well as in the outer hall during the rites of veneration of the small Kannon. It clearly distinguishes these liturgical sections as devotional practices with a different set of symbolic dynamics.

The liturgical segments associated with the kami are also constructed through an intersection of sound/no sound and movement. *Ōnakatomi harae*, the incantation that opens the *shunie*, is mimed by the master of spells. He kneels, the short *kesa* loose on his left shoulder, probably to denote that this cleansing exorcism does not appeal to the power of the buddhas, but that of the kami. Holding a small *gohei* 御幣, he unrolls the scroll that contains the text of the formula with almost

imperceptible movements of his hands. His lips move fast but no sound can be heard (Image 7). He remains still in this position until the end of the formula, when he suddenly jumps up, extending his right leg with an abrupt movement that concludes the rite. The Nakatomi formula evokes the institutional aspects of kami worship. It was originally an important prayer (*norito* 祝詞) pronounced by state ritualists, although in fact its recitation was introduced in the *shunie* in the medieval period, when the incantation underwent compelling esoteric interpretations.[11] Its exorcising power as the opening step of the second-month assembly resides both in this historical pedigree and in the peculiarity of its performance, the stillness of its recitation capturing the mystery and invisibility of the kami, and the brusque final movement awakening to their blessing.

Image 7: The master of exorcism recites the Nakatomi formula.
Photo by the author

11 On the use of the Nakatomi harae during the *shunie* and other Buddhist exoteric rituals, see Daitō 2008.

Inviting guardian deities to attend Buddhist rituals was a common feature of early Buddhist rituals. During the *shunie*, both at Yakushiji and Tōdaiji, practitioners receive the blessings of the kami before starting the liturgy, and recite sutras and other invocations in front of guardian shrines. In the Tōdaiji assembly, however, the presence of the kami seems articulated in a more complex way, and staged in a variety of ritual actions. Another recitative segment, which is part of the daily liturgy, is the declamation of the Register of Gods (*jinmyōchō* 神名帳). A long list of names of deities of Japan is read every day, at the beginning of the nightly rites, by a soloist. The reading takes place in the inner hall by the light of an oil lamp, announced by the blowing of conch shells. It is done with a rough voice, slowly at first, then very quickly, then quietly again, depending on the class of gods whose name is pronounced. A rhythm is thus introduced into what would otherwise be the plain reading of a text with no content. Only clerics who have trained for three years and who have been given oral transmission can act as declaimer. This points at the secretive mode in which the matters of the gods are dealt with, a feature discernible in other segments of the liturgy as well.

The reading of the Register of Gods is linked with the very origin of the second-month assemblies. As is well known, an early list of official shrines across Japan, whose cult was sponsored by the court, was given in Books Nine and Ten of the *Engishiki*. Scholars see the effort to compile a "national register" that included all deities of the "five provinces and seven highways" in the context of the expansion of Buddhism outside the capital, and in close connection with the staging of Buddhist liturgical assemblies in countryside shrines.[12] In the medieval period a distinction was made between the sets of kami that represented the entire country, listed in a *kokunai jinmyōchō* 国内神名帳, and by then numbering 951,500, and the set of kami relevant to a specific shrine-temple complex, and which would be summoned on the occasion of its ritual practices (*kanjō jinmyōchō* 勧請神名帳). The ritual device of reading their names served to call upon the guardian gods of Japan to rejoice in the ritual, and remind them to protect the temple and its practices. The list produced for Tōdaiji counted around five hundred deities, divided between bodhisattvas (*daibosatsu* 大菩薩), great eminent kami (*daimyōjin* 大明神), eminent kami (*myōjin* 明神), heavenly deities (*tenjin* 天神), and restless spirits (*goryō* 御霊).[13] This is the roster still declaimed today.

In medieval literary sources the reading of the *jinmyōchō* was considered the starting point of the repentance rituals, and thus this liturgical segment was emphasised in the performance, as well as in the mythological narratives that legitimised the ritual. The origin story of the second-month assembly says that when Jitchū

12 Uejima 2004: 247–249. On the national register of kami see Mitsuhashi 1999. This development contributed both to instilling the concept of "the country of Japan" in the local audience, and to making it participate in the soteriological dimension of the assembly.

13 This is, by and large, the list given in *Kaidanin kōyō kanjō jinmyōchō*.

performed the ritual for the first time, he read a Register of the Gods, summoning 13,700 gods to attend his ceremony. Onyū myōjin 遠敷明神, the god of Wakasa 若狭 province (today's Fukui prefecture), was delayed in arriving because he was then fishing in the Onyū river. To compensate for his late arrival, he expressed his wish to offer scented water to the deity to whom the observances were devoted. At that point two cormorants, one black and the other white, took off from a rock near the hall and water began to spring from that very spot (Image 8).[14] Such mythological construal of the intervention of a god from another area of Japan functioned to validate the liturgical repentance with the endorsement of the deities of the entire country, and positioned the specific ritual space of Kannon at Tōdaiji within a country-wide context. At the same time, it served to emphasise that both buddhas and kami are crucial protagonists of the liturgies.

Image 8: The sacred well (*akai*) of Nigatsudō with a clay cormorant on the roof
Photo by the author

14 This legendary origin of the *jinmyōchō* ritual and of the sacred spring is narrated in the oldest origin story (*engi* 縁起) of Tōdaiji, *Tōdaiji yōroku*, dated 1160. Late Muromachi-period illustrated *engi* supply vivid representations of the legend. See Nara National Museum 2006.

Enacting the Performance: Actors and Patrons

Whether one looks at the second-month assemblies as public rituals or as acts of ascetic practice, they appear to be centred on a specific group of clerics with distinct qualifications. Yet the participation of the laity is indispensable to their enactment. I would like to briefly consider these two groups of people whose interaction makes the performance of the *shunie* possible.

a. Ritualists. Participation in the Tōdaiji second-month assembly was a selective matter from the beginning. Historically the religious affiliation of the practitioners was determined by the changing religio-political situation of Nigatsudō. Until the early Kamakura period, the celebrants were Kegon monks physically living in the upper section of the Tōdaiji precincts (Nigatsudō and the close-by Hokkedō 法華堂). This attests to the distinct links that Nigatsudō established with the Kegon school, documented in other historical material, and enhanced by the myth of the foundation of the *shunie* by Jitchū. (Jitchū allegedly was a disciple of Rōben 良弁, the Kegon monk who established Tōdaiji.)[15] From the mid-Kamakura period, however, the second-month practices were joined by monks affiliated to other parts of Tōdaiji, in particular Sanron scholar-monks and monks of the Nakamondō 中門堂.[16] In more recent times participation has been enlarged to clerics belonging to different Tōdaiji sub-temples, and today even to affiliated temples in the provinces, as the list of this year's participants indicates.

Originally two different groups of ritualists performed in each of the seven-day periods into which the liturgy is formally divided. One sees traces of the earlier pattern in a procedure still upheld in today's protocol, the administration of the precepts to the practitioners on the first day of the liturgy and again after seven days. The original pattern implies that there was a larger number of monks interested in undergoing the training and performing the repentance than there are today, when only eleven clerics participate. In fact diaries and other historical sources document that the number of participants in the second-month assemblies was more than twenty, until around the end of the sixteenth century, with a maximum of twenty-six for a single year. The number diminished in the seventeenth century, but it increased again at the beginning of the eighteenth century. Clearly amendment had to be made to the formal aspects of the performance to deal with this evolution effectively.[17] However, even when a shortage of monks hampered the protocol, the ritual remained closed to monks who were not properly trained and had not received secret transmission of the procedures.

15 On Jitchū's (foreign) origins, as well as his dates, various conjectures exist. He is understood to have been active in the mid-eighth century.

16 Nagamura 2001: 83–84.

17 Satō 2001: 45.

Changes have also occurred in the division of ritual tasks. Until the Meiji period scholar-monks (*gakutō* 学頭) and ordinary monks (*dōshū* 堂衆) were distinguished by occupying different sections of the ritual space in the inner hall. Today this distinction is no longer made. In addition, while the four leading monks (*shishiki* 四職)[18] originally performed the *gotai* prostrations along with the other practitioners, annotations in early-modern ritual manuals show that, when their physical condition was not sufficiently good, they were allowed to skip this segment. From the mid-Edo period they no longer performed it.[19] This clearly affected the meaning of the liturgy as a collective repentance. Hierarchies are still maintained in today's protocol, but they appear to be determined by ritual expertise rather than status, as demonstrated by the liturgical role played by the four leading celebrants on the one hand, and by the cleric who has most recently entered the practice (*shosekai* 処世界) on the other.

Although they do not perform the repentance, three types of semi-ordained, semi-lay assistant ritualists (*sanyaku* 三役) have to be mentioned as indispensable actors of the ritual. The main one of these, the *dōdōji* 堂童子, still played by a male member of the Inagaki family, conducts some of the rituals that take place outside the inner hall and oversees them all, interacting continuously with the master of ceremonies (Image 9).

b. Supporting the ritual. Most Buddhist assemblies in the Nara and early Heian periods were sponsored by the state and the aristocracy, who donated money and lands for their performance. Common people, too, established "karmic relations" with the temples by giving goods or offering their services on the occasion of these rituals. In the case of the Tōdaiji *shunie*, however, there is no evidence that aristocrats from Kyoto started attending the second-month assemblies before the mid-Kamakura period. Scholars have pointed out that the practitioners themselves were the major sponsors of the *shunie*, and for this they gathered and managed finances. At the same time, in the medieval period, the assembly became the opportunity to foster links between the temple and the laity, a relation that would become stronger and expand in later periods, enclosing wider strata of the populace.[20] Such performative aspects of a ritual are usually documented by historical materials such as temple records, certificates of donations, and rosters of people attending the liturgies. However, the protocol of the Tōdaiji *shunie* inscribes the significance of patronage and the changing relations with the laity in the liturgical script itself. Two ritual actions, in particular, attest to such concern.

18 In addition to the master of spells and master of recitations, already mentioned, there is a "head priest" (*wajō* 和上), who usually is the most senior cleric of the group and administers the precepts, and a "master of ceremonies" (*dōtsukasa* 堂司), in charge of directing the practical sides of the ritual.

19 Satō 2001: 49–50.

20 See Nagamura 2001, in particular 63–66 and 86.

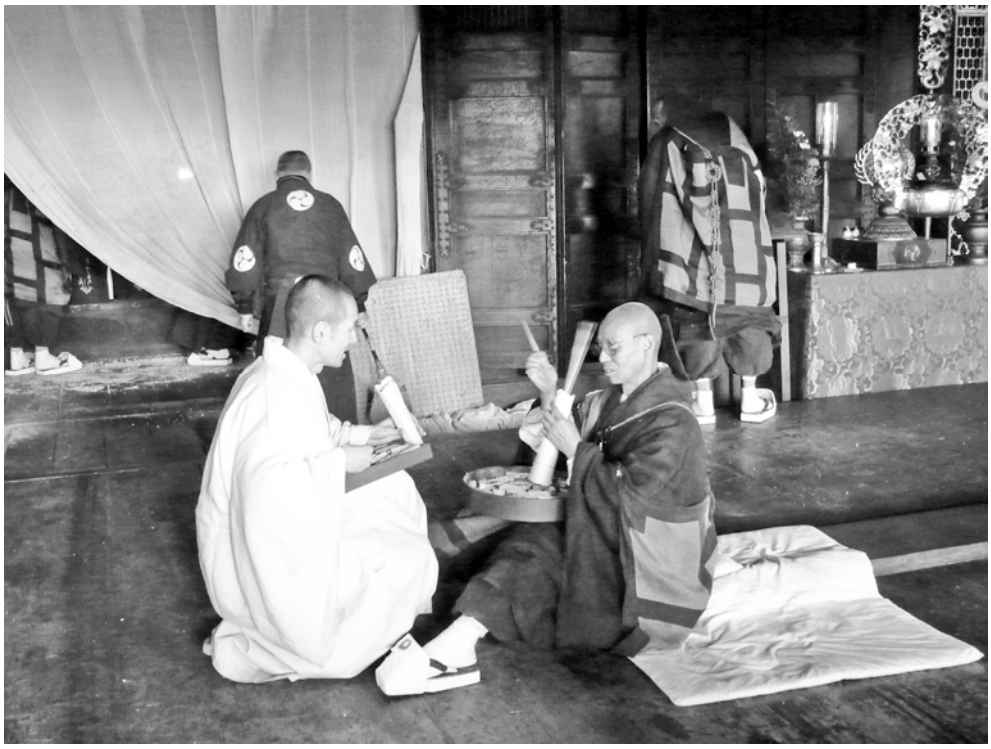

Image 9: Master of ceremonies (*dōtsukasa*) and attendant (*dōdōji*)
Photo by the author

The first is the declamation of a Register of Patrons called *kakochō* 過去帳. This is not the usual *kakochō* kept in Buddhist temples, which consists of a record of the dead cared for by each temple, and is used for their commemorative rites. Rather, it is a list of monastics and lay people who contributed to the existence of the Tōdaiji and supported the performance of the second-month liturgies in a variety of ways. It starts with emperor Shōmu, who established Tōdaiji, and unfolds through the names of famous monks and political leaders who made considerable donations to the temple, and of unknown men and women who offered smaller gifts, such as the accessories to be used during the liturgical assembly or robes for the monks. By recounting their names and achievements, the practitioners acknowledge their patronage and karmic links (Images11a–b).[21] The roster of names

21 The oldest *kakochō* extant today is dated from the end of the sixteenth to the early seventeenth century. See Nara National Museum 2006: 46–47 and Gangōji bunkazai kenkyūjo 1979: vol. 1 (shiryōhen). Fig. 11 shows a manuscript copy of the *kakochō* in possession of Kamitsukasa Kaiun (1906–1975), Tōdaiji priest and later *bettō*, and includes the intonation marks (*fushi hakase* 節博士). Published in appendix to Iijima 1942.

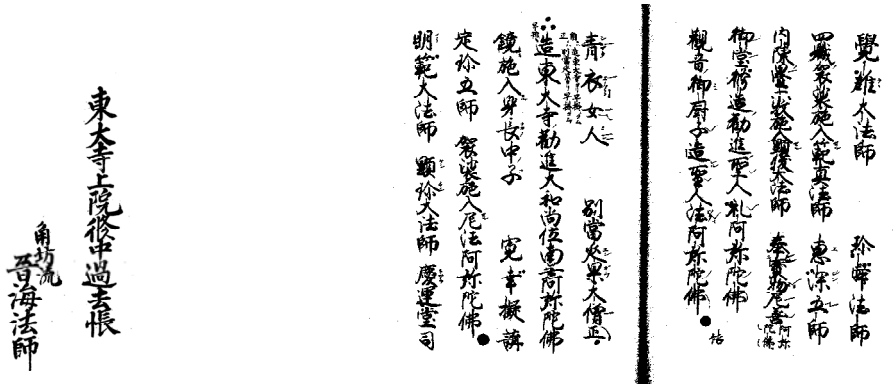

Image 11: The Register of Patrons (*kakochō*). Cover page (a) and section with the name "woman in green", with notations for the declamation (b)
Source: Iijima 1942

is extensive, filling a thirty-four-metre scroll. It includes 2,412 people for a span of time that goes from the mythical beginning of the liturgy to the early modern period, but today the reading is abbreviated in places. The *kakochō* is recited twice during the assembly, on the fifth (Jitchū's memorial day) and on the twelfth day. It is read at the beginning of the nightly sections, after the Register of the Gods, by a cantor sitting in the inner hall. The style of declamation is similar to that of the Register of the Gods, and progresses with significant accelerations of the voice. The clerics in charge of this performance are selected from those who have taken part in the assembly five times.

Thus the *kakochō* may be considered an extraordinary record of the devotional history of the second-month assembly and of Tōdaiji. At the same time, it serves as a device to pray for the attainment of enlightenment by all those who have established a karmic connection with the temple or with Kannon – generations of rulers, monks, and lay people. The ritual reading of the roster had its mythological underpinning in the story of the "woman in green (blue) robes" (*shōe no nyonin* 青衣女人). This legend first appeared in late medieval illustrated narratives on the *shunie*.[22] It relates that, during one performance in the Jōgen years (1207–1211), a woman dressed in green clothes appeared in front of the monks, who were declaiming the *kakochō*, and asked why her name had been dropped from the register. Since then the name "woman in green" has been included in the roster, and it is still read with a tone and rhythm that marks the significance of this episode in the economy

22 *Tōdaiji engi ekotoba* (fourteenth century) and *Nigatsudō engi emaki* (sixteenth century). See also Nara National Museum 2006: 39 and 41.

of the ritual (Image 11b). Nigatsudō was constructed as the sacred space for buddhas and kami, to which only men following ascetic practices (an activity notoriously perceived in misogynistic terms in the Buddhist world) had access and could share with the deities during the ritual, but which was off limits for women. The "woman in green", by appearing not with her actual body but as a spirit, pushed herself into the world of the sacred, demonstrating that the benefit of the ritual extended to everybody.

The second ritual element that links the practitioners to the audience is the production of talismans. Such action takes place inside the inner hall on two nights of the ritual, the eighth and the ninth. Silently, between the two recitative segments performed by the master of recitations, each practitioner rubs two woodblocks to make two distinctive prints. One is a protective talisman that goes by the name of "seal of the ox-jewel" (*goō hōin* 牛玉宝印). It is composed of a rectangular print of three sets of logographs, the name Nigatsudō in the middle and, at its sides, two formulas praising Kannon (lit. "her buddha-head", i.e. the highest of Kannon's eleven heads) for averting evil and diseases. A double seal depicting two jewels in red cinnabar with Kannon's seed-letters inscribed inside is further stamped in the middle of the print (Image 13a). The second talisman is a print of the circular *sonshō darani* 尊勝陀羅尼 in Sanskrit script (Image 13b). This is one of the most widespread Buddhist *dhāranī* in East Asia, employed to invoke good health and long life. Blessings that use an ox-seal, on the other hand, are attested in Japanese esoteric rituals since the late Heian period.[23] The practitioners bestow these talismans in different ways. They are handed out to Tōdaiji clerics who do not take part in the ritual, are granted to the members of the confraternities that attend to the practical aspects of the ritual, and are available for purchase at the temple. After the assembly is concluded, on 18 March, the talismans are also sent to the imperial family – the only ones it receives officially today. The talismans are regarded as especially empowered, because of the special status of the clerics who have printed them, and the context in which they are produced. Such efficacy sanctions the benefits carried by the liturgical practice beyond the wall of the ritual hall and the restricted circle of practitioners.

23 Matsuo 2006. The term *goō* is probably related to the ox's yellow (*goō* 牛黄 in the Japanese pronunciation), an important substance in Chinese alchemy, which was used as a magical medicinal remedy, and is often mentioned in Japanese medieval Buddhism. There is evidence that the ox-seal used during the *shunie* was understood as a sort of wish-fulfilling jewel or relic, and that the exorcism, which the practitioners perform during the ritual with a willow cane on which the talisman is inserted (*goō tsue* 牛玉杖), was seen as a ritual of empowerment of the body of the king, and, by extension, of the entire country (ibid.). Both at Tōdaiji and at Yakushiji at the end of the assembly the seal is impressed upon the practitioners' foreheads.

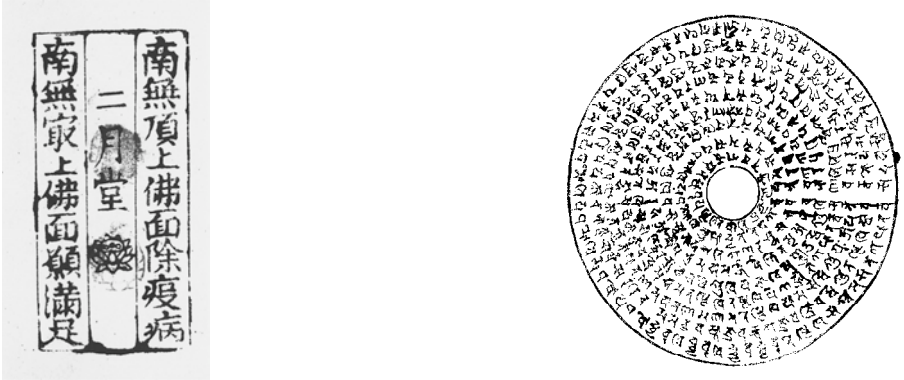

Image 13: Amulets: (a) ox-seal (*goō*); (b) *sonshō darani*
From the author's private collection

Today the *shunie* are mostly financed from the revenues of the Great Buddha Hall, visited every day by thousands of tourists who never climb up to Nigatsudō. During the liturgy the temple employs more than fifty people in various capacities to attend to the practitioners. Yet the practise of the ritual would not be possible without the labour of several lay confraternities (*kōsha* 講社) from different provinces of the country. Among the oldest, which scholars date back to the early Edo period, are those in charge of the wood from which the torches for the *dattan* rite are made (Iga ichinoi taimatsu kō 松伊賀一の井松明講, from Miura prefecture), and those in charge of the oil for the lamps that are burned in the hall during the ceremonies (Hyakunin kō 百人講, from Kyoto). Stone inscriptions near Nigatsudō attest to the existence of a Thousand People Association in 1745 and Southern and Northern Associations in 1810. The confraternities were systematised after the Meiji period.[24] Today only thirty-three are left. Some are in charge of the preparatory steps for the *shunie*, such as selecting and taking to Tōdaiji the long bamboo poles on which the torches are installed (Yamashiro taimatsu kō 山城松明講). Others attend to the ritual steps conducted outside the hall, such as the warden of the *omizutori*, who, dressed as shrine attendants, escort the procession that goes to draw water from the sacred well (Kawachi Eikyūsha 河内永久社). Yet another group staffs a propitiatory rite for children, which takes place on the morning after the liturgy is concluded (Asamairi kō 朝参り講).[25] The confraternities at times offer the bamboo poles for the large torches. These are also donated by individuals petitioning for the well-being of their families and harmonious relations in their homes, as the inscriptions on the poles show (Image 10).

24 *Shunie to kō*: 20–21.
25 *Shunie to kō*: 2–19.

Image 10: Bamboos with inscriptions from donors
Photo by the author

Epilogue: the Multivocal Performativity of the *shunie*

The second-month assembly of Tōdaiji is celebrated as a "ritual practice that will never decline" (*futai no gyōhō* 不退の行法), a liturgy that has been performed when other ceremonies were discontinued because of lack of finances, wars, or the burning of temple buildings. At the beginning of the sixteenth century, after a fire started inside Nigatsudō, the community of monks at Tōdaiji feared that the ritual would disappear. In reaction, the compilation of ritual manuals, oral transmissions, and annotated interpretations of the protocol increased.[26] A historical overview of the practice shows that such continuity was assured by the changes that the performance of the *shunie* underwent, in relation to movements in the broader context of Japanese religion. The medieval period, in particular, was crucial for the introduction of kami-related segments such as the Nakatomi formula, and the creation of origin stories, through which mythological interpretations of the ritual were made possible. Other additions and adaptations took place before and after, and to a certain extent still do.

What, then, defines the *shunie* as a public ritual today, and for whom does it generate meaning? As this paper has sought to demonstrate, the second-month assembly at Tōdaiji is a complex ceremony that combines different performative elements, each playing a role in the dynamics by which the ritual is constructed, signified, and enjoyed by different agents. Yet two basic motifs seem to surface which frame the liturgy and give it its distinctive character: a ludic theme, which stems from the very origin of the rite, has turned it into a popular one, and is undergoing a continuous amplification and commercialisation; and an ascetic theme, which may be regarded as the inward and experiential dimension of the ritual, but which has affected its public presentation with notions of bodily purity, construction of sacred space, and physical expression of repentance. These motifs may be understood as two levels in the practice and perception of the second-month assembly. They coexist and are equally necessary to the ritual and its performativity. At the same time, each seems to stage a different setting for the implementation of the ritual, and to imply a different audience. On the one hand, the *omizutori* is acclaimed for its spectacular effects and exorcistic virtues. The fire extravaganza takes place outside Nigatsudō, and can be enjoyed by everyone. The practitioners play hardly any role in it. The size of the bamboo poles, the fire effects, and the ability of the attendants who carry the torches determine its results. On the other hand, the *omizutori* is also perceived as an intense and dramatic liturgy shaped by ascetic exercises and melodic chanting. The ritual segments connected to repentance are performed by trained specialists in a space almost completely inaccessible to the public. Such is the dining hall at the bottom of Nigatsudō, where the precepts are imparted and the ritual meal consumed, or the inner hall of Nigatsudō

26 Satō 2001: 44–45.

Image 12: The eternal lamp for Kannon
Photo by the author

constructed around the altar to Kannon.[27] The latter is separated from the outer hall by doors and by a white curtain that for most of the performance reveals only the shadows of the clerics circumambulating the altar and the light of the eternal lamp burned for Kannon (Image 12). These parts of the liturgy seem to be meant exclusively for the clerics. There is, however, a curious relation between inside and outside, seeing and non-seeing, which opens up the possibility of partaking in the ritual with one's senses. As the assembly progresses, the side and back doors of the inner hall are open and people who stand or sit in the corridors around the inner hall are given visual access to the practice, albeit partially and through one or two lattice doors. Other ritual spaces also offer the opportunity to break into the liturgical secrecy. The interior of the dining hall is completely closed off, but the bestowal of the precepts can be "heard" as a whisper through a small window. Moreover, during the ritual meal, the doors behind a small shrine placed in one of the corners of the building are open, and the public can silently peep through, a few people at a time, to see what happens inside.[28] Altogether it appears that the more

27 The *gotai* repentance, however, which may be considered a demonstration of physical ability, is always performed in the outer hall, where it can be seen through the lattice doors.

28 The ritual space in its totality, that is, the precincts of Nigatsudō, is also marked by multiple and consecutive ropes that delineate sacred enclosures (*kekkai* 結界). On the day on which the ritual starts there are ropes as far as the Lotus Hall and the stone lantern in front of the gate to Hachimangū, and in front of the place where the Nakatomi harae is recited. Surprisingly, these limitations are progressively eliminated.

the practice enters its climax, the more it is disclosed. Some degrees of inaccessibility are maintained throughout, though. For instance, in the last days of the ritual men are allowed into the corridor surrounding the inner hall, while women never are. They may only "watch" from the outer corridors, where raised platforms are built for them to sit on. Several women I have spoken to, however, consider such seats, which are called *tsubone* 局 (lit. "ladies' rooms"), as privileged places that allow a more intimate perspective on the ritual. Thus the construction of the ritual space is affected by the nature of the performance as an ascetic practice and manifests the gender discrimination determined by the proximity to the sacred.

The multi-levelled connotation of the second-month assembly is reflected in the complex picture of the people to whom this is a meaningful practice. Next to the practitioners, who undergo an ascetic regime and are conscious of the soteriological role that their actions are supposed to play, there is an audience, for whom the *omizutori* is performed. Such an audience may be broadly divided into two groups. The first consists of occasional attendees, who attend the fire spectacle and seek its benefits by standing below Nigatsudō to receive the sparks of fire, and by collecting burned wood from the torches to take home as charms. They visit the hall briefly to pay homage to the deity and are usually not concerned with what the practitioners perform. The second group consists of those who attend the liturgy to see and to listen to the monks practising. They arrive from various parts of Japan, are very knowledgeable about each ritual step, stand outside the dining hall to listen to the recitation of the precepts, and then spend the night sitting in silence in front or in the back of the inner hall. They have as different a reason to attend the liturgy as one may find in other religious practices in Japan – acquiring merits for one's or others' benefit, devotion to Kannon, interest in the musical features of the ritual. Yet all seem to share a sense that the experience is uplifting and has a positive impact on their lives. For this they attend every year, if not the entire ritual then at least parts of it, making clear that it is necessary to renew such an experience. In this sense they are not simple "witnesses" to the clerical practice. By enduring the cold, the lack of sleep, and the uncomfortable sitting (although several people take pillows and blankets), and by following the sounds and movements generated in the ritual space with awe and appreciation, they partake in the performance and seal its ritual efficacy.

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