



Christian Göhlert, *Die Verehrung von Wasserleichen und ihre Stellung im japanischen Volksglauben*

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THIS year, German ethnography on Japan has seen the latest release from the renowned publishing house Iudicium, the intriguingly named “The Veneration of Corpses Found at Sea and their Position in Japanese Popular Belief” (*Die Verehrung von Wasserleichen und ihre Stellung im japanischen Volksglauben*).

At one hundred and thirty-nine pages, this is a relatively slender volume, but it is without doubt based on solid research. Commendably, thirty-two of its fifty-four listed sources are Japanese, and the presentation of data in the text shows that Christian Göhlert, a graduate of the Japan Centre at the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität in Munich, gave his source materials a truly thorough reading before he decided, with much aplomb, to publish these results of his MA research.

As the title suggests, the book is concerned with one of the more obscure facets of Japanese folk belief, but it is also somewhat misleading, as only fourteen pages towards the end of the book actually cover the ritual treatment of corpses fished out of the sea. The preceding chapters, dealing with various aspects of folk religion, are to supply the background knowledge that is necessary to properly locate this unusual topic within the wider context of spiritual life in Japan’s fishing communities.

The first chapter is dedicated to the concept of spiritual pollution known as *kegare*, with a particular focus on its two most consequential manifestations, *kurokegare* related to death, and the blood-related *akakegare*. In twenty-eight pages, the author outlines several detailed examples to highlight how *kegare* in its various manifestations is seen to adversely affect Japan’s fishing communities and their vessels, and which rituals are being employed to prevent or counter such spiritual pollution.

In the next, slightly shorter chapter, he deals with the deity Ebisu. First, he describes Ebisu’s place in Japanese folk belief and position at the limen, due to Ebisu’s latent character as a *marebito*, a temporary intruder in the local community who is seen as potentially both beneficial and harmful. He then elaborates on Ebisu veneration among Japan’s fishermen and the wide range of objects that can serve as manifestations of this deity, with corpses discovered at sea being one such manifestation.

The next fifty-one pages, clearly the most substantial part of the book, are dedicated to spiritual beliefs tied directly to the fishermen’s vessels, in particular those beliefs that concern the *funadama*, the “ship’s spirit” who represents the numinous on board. Here, the author gives detailed descriptions of the various manifestations of the generally female *funadama* as well as their location on board, the purported influence they have on the fate of both vessel and crew, and the rituals and taboos surrounding them, such as their introduction onto the vessel and their temporary or

permanent removal. He also outlines the regional variations of *shintai*, objects which come to represent the presence of the *funadama* on board. Throughout this chapter, the crucial importance of spiritual purity in all matters regarding the *funadama*, and of avoiding of all potential sources of *kegare*, is repeatedly pointed out.

This sets the stage for the part that relates to the book's title, how the fishermen cope with the intrusion of a major source of *kegare*, a human corpse, on board. Again, examples are given for regional variations on how to hoist the corpse out of the water, where and how to store it on board, how to treat it after return to port, and how to reestablish the ship's spiritually pure state once the corpse has been removed. The dead body's *marebito* character is emphasized, with its obvious threat to the *funadama* but also its promise of a bountiful catch, and the author closes with his own interpretation of the event, speculating whether the fishermen employ the corpse's *kegare* consciously to counteract potential pollution with pollution.

Unfortunately, the author's manner of presentation fails to live up to his certainly interesting topic. Strictly speaking, his publication summarizes the Japanese literature on this topic, drawing heavily on writings such as Makita Shigeru's *Umi no minzokugaku*, and particularly Namihira Emiko's publications on *kegare* and the treatment of corpses at sea. In itself, this is nothing to be critical about, but the author regrettably adopts a vagueness in his writing which leaves his readers wondering about the actual relevance of what he presents. Many of his examples, presented in a very generalized manner, are obviously taken from a very limited local background. Also, the choice of ritual variations he presents seems somewhat random, with little to tie the various localities from all over the country together. Again, other examples avoid the location altogether, making do with a simple "in other areas."

Trying to locate his descriptions in time is even harder. His tendency to use the present tense throughout suggests that these rituals are indeed being performed today, but one soon starts to wonder how much of what he describes is still valid today. To wit, the rituals around the burial of a corpse fished from the sea: How many funerals in Japan are still performed without cremation? Also, how many drowning victims are actually still buried in the described manner, without the authorities stepping in and taking care of the corpse's disposal? At the beginning of his last chapter, the author actually raises this question himself and points out that the last two incidents Namihira speaks about, dating from 1970 and 1971, were already being handled by the authorities, but he goes on nevertheless to delve into the rituals in a manner that suggests that they are still valid today.

So what remained in the end for this reader was an obvious sense of dissatisfaction. Certainly, the author offers a plethora of interesting local customs, but not being able to place this information within a larger framework and to gain any idea about their actual relevance, I was left somewhat irritated: lots of fascinating detail, but little to pin it all down in time and place. As the author himself concedes in closing, *bleiben zahlreiche Fragen offen*—many questions remain unanswered.

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