

The Vedic Gods of Japan

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The Vedas tell us that the gods (*deva* in Sanskrit) reside within the mind. But since physical reality is also experienced as a construction of the mind, therefore, one may see the Vedic gods in the physical space and its relationships. These conceptions led to the detailed exposition of the devas in yoga, tantra as well as in architecture and iconography.¹

The Vedic way recognizes that reality is a synthesis of opposites. We are suspended between being and becoming, between hazy memories of the past and fears for the future. Within each of us lie not only sublime thoughts but also avarice and greed. We are the battlefield of a struggle between the gods and demons. The opposites require an act of balance so that the individual's relationship to Truth is articulated only partly by means of abstract ideas, and it needs art – in performance and representation – to complete the picture.

The two poles of the approach to reality are provided by the Upaniṣadic mahāvākyas: “I am Brahman” or “I am the Universe” (*aham brahmāsmi*) and “Not this, not this” (*neti, neti*). These lead to two artistic styles: one rich and textured, the other spare and austere. One speaks of infinite possibility and structure (*Brahman*), the other of nothingness (*śūnyatā*). Each of these is the ground of the other; within one lays the other in endless recursive details. This is the essence of the paradox taught in the Vedas to help one learn that one is not a thing, but a process. On the one hand are the maddeningly complex rituals, on the other the simplicity of dhyāna (meditation). Both these styles are to be incorporated within the life process.

The Western philological approach to the Vedas not only misses this understanding of the Vedas, it has misguided generations of scholars and laypersons into a simplistic view of Indian culture. It sees Hinduism and Buddhism in dichotomous terms that appear absurd to those within the tradition. The Buddha himself affirmed on the basis of his own direct experience the existence of the various elements of the Vedic world view, including the existence of many hells, heavens, and various supernatural beings like devas, asuras (demons), and rākṣasas. The Buddha claimed to have seen these realms and beings with his divine sight, and he also claimed to have observed how sentient beings cycle through these diverse forms of existence in the interminable process of transmigration. The Buddha, therefore, took for granted the Vedic cosmic geography wherein all these natural and supernatural beings lived. It is no wonder then that the anthology *Subhāṣitaratnakoṣa* of Vidyākara (c. 1100) a Buddhist abbot at the monastery of Jagaddala in present-day Bangladesh,² has 20 verses to the Buddha, but 73 to Śiva, and 40 to Viṣṇu.

The philologists and the anthropologists wonder what Śiva and Viṣṇu are doing in a book by a Buddhist. Neither can they explain how the Vedic devas continue to be a part of the Mahāyāna pantheon. Their texts absurdly describe the Vedic devas of Japan and China as Buddhist since according to legend they became followers of the Buddha when he started

preaching. The Buddha in the Mahāyāna tradition is the principle of Understanding, who fits in perfectly within the Vedic conception, and we see this most emphatically in the Lotus Sūtra (*Saddharma Puṇḍarīka Sūtra*).

Living in an isolated valley, Kashmiris have maintained many old customs, although their recent tragic history has been responsible for much loss of the meaning of their ceremonies. For example, we were told of six psychological states of the existence, where the lowest three states represented (1) ideas of evil people, (2) ghosts of unfulfilled desires, and (3) our animal nature. The highest three states are (4) asuras, who take the bodies to be all that we are; (5) humans; and (6) devas, who embody the essence of the various *tattvas* (or their combinations) that constitutes the world of the mind. There were ceremonies in which the *yakṣas* were invoked. We didn't quite understand these ceremonies although we were reminded of their connection to architecture and directions by their appearance in the ruins at Avantipur and Mārtaṇḍa.

The Vedic devas went to China and Japan through Kashmir. The fourth great council was held there under the patronage of the Kuṣāṇa emperor Kanīṣka (r. 78-120) in around 100 CE, where monks of the Sarvāstivādin School compiled a new canon. This became the basis of Mahāyāna. The Vedic devas were a part of this understanding, as was dhyāna of the Vedic tradition (Ch'an in China and Zen in Japan) with devotion to Īśvara (Śiva) as its ultimate objective (Yogasūtra 1.23). The Parihāsapura monuments (near Śrīnagar) of the Cankuna stūpa (Kārkota dynasty, 8th century) “served as a model all across Asia from the Pamir Mountains to Japan”.³ The Kashmiri images of the Vedic devas were also much copied. The art historian Susan Huntington reminds us: “The Yunkang caves in China, the wall paintings from several sites in Inner Asia, especially Qizil and Tun-huang, the paintings from the cache at Tun-huang, and some iconographic manuscripts from Japan, for example, should be evaluated with Kaśmīr in mind as a possible source.”⁴

Vedic ideas were also taken to Japan by the sea route from South India and Southeast Asia. That serves to explain the specific transformations of some Sanskrit terms into Japanese through Tamil phonology. For example, consider the transformation of Sanskrit *homa*, the Vedic fire rite, into Japanese *goma*, where the initiation is given by the *achari* (Sanskrit *ācārya*). The Sanskrit mantras in Japan are written the Siddham script of South India.

In this article, I present the main Vedic gods that are popular in present-day Japan. I begin with the Vedic fire and consecration ceremonies and then describe the gods of the directions and a few goddesses.

Goma-Homa

Homa, Vedic fire rite, remains central to religion in Japan. It consists of mantra, mudrā⁵, and maṇḍala. In the Vedic fire-ritual manuals, some instructions regarding mudrā are given. For example, the ladles are to be held in the śaṅkha-mudrā, and when the priest enters the chamber, he is to put his right palm downward on his left palm at right angles and close the hands. The fire-ritual is the quintessential Vedic ritual, emphasizing the

process of transformation.⁶ The artistic parallels of this ritual is presented most clearly by Kapila Vatsyayan.⁷

Abhiṣeka

Another Vedic rite that is widely practiced is abhiṣeka (consecration). The initiates are given a potion to drink before they enter the room. Inside, the initiate places the right foot on an elephant, which represents Gaṇeśa or Vināyaka, (Kangitan in Japanese) as he is the remover of obstacles. Next, the initiates rub powdered incense on their hands, and dab it on their foreheads and also on their tongues, and then swallow the potion.

Now the candidate enters the first room, where the *samaya* vow (*sammaya-kai*) – the vow of secrecy -- is administered. They hear hymns being chanted as they are given instructions as to the meaning of the rite by the priest. Another image of Gaṇeśa is seen surrounded by offerings.

Two maṇḍalas are used in the ceremonies:⁸ the garbhadhātu (womb maṇḍala) and the vajradhātu (diamond maṇḍala). The candidates are first initiated into the garbhadhātu; the following day they are initiated into the vajradhātu. The candidates are each blindfolded with a strip, white for the womb maṇḍala, red for the vajra maṇḍala. A folded paper flower, white or red depending on the maṇḍala, is put between their joined hands, with their fingers slightly crossed at the end, and then they are led in front of the maṇḍala in a central room.

The candidate goes through a landscape-screened labyrinth of the oblong buildings (corresponding to the Vedic goddess temple), to its centre, the womb, (the garbhagrha section of the Indian temple), where the maṇḍala is located. The squares of the maṇḍala corresponding to the deities are left blank, with white circles. A homa fire is burning in the chamber.

The candidate now is given a flower to throw at the maṇḍala. The circle on which it lands becomes the candidate's tutelary deity for life, and this is whispered into his ear by the master. Now the blindfold is taken off and the candidate is taken to a side table. A crown is placed on his head, showing his initiation.

Water from a well has been drawn in advance with special mantras to make it symbolic of the five oceans. Now the master pours five drops of it on the crown of the candidate and consecrates him as a monarch, *cakravartin*, of dharma. Next the master takes a bronze needle (śalākā in Sanskrit) and applies it to his eye, saying “the scales of ignorance have fallen from your eyes; your eyes are open.” Then he takes a bronze mirror and holds it up to the newly initiated master (no longer a candidate), for him to see his face.

This is the illumination just as it is done in inaugurating a new mūrti or a new icon, when the mirror is held up to the icon so that the first gaze of the newly consecrated icon is caught in the mirror and reflected back at the icon. As the icon animates itself, the newly

enlightened master is enlightened by himself. The new master has become an ācārya (and he can ordain or initiate others. He can perform rituals which increase in strength and power, and above all he can call upon his tutelary deity at any time. He has entered the maṇḍala. He did not just go into the room, but actually became part of the maṇḍala. He has become a living deva.

The devas are called *tenbu* (or merely *ten*, when used as a suffix after the deva name). There are a large number of devas, depending on how you count them. One may consider them as capacities of the mind, as attributes, or as projections in space and time.

Guardians of All Directions

As guardians of directions, the devas are often listed as a group of twelve that includes the lordship of the four quarters and four semi-quarters (the eight *dikpālas*, given below as by Amarsimha in *Amarakośa*), up and down and the sun and moon. The last four may also be considered as the three divisions of the world: the earth, the moon (for atmosphere), the sun (for sky), and the transcending *Brahman* (who may be taken to represent heaven). Representations of the Twelve Devas were made in 1127 C.E. to be hung at the annual, New Year's ceremony of esoteric prayers, held at Shingon-in, in the Imperial Palace in Kyoto and are now in the Kyoto National Museum.

Bon (Heaven; Brahman). Bonten guards the upward direction.



Taishaku (East; Indra). Taishakuten is the leader of the gods.



Ka (SE; Agni)



Emma (South; Yama)



Rasatsu (SW; Nairṛti, Rākṣasa)



Sui (West; Varuṇa). Sui-ten is literally water-deva; note the shimmering quality and the lightness of features.



Fu (NW; Marut, Vāyu)



Bishamon (North; Kubera, Vaiśravaṇa). He is said to live halfway down the north side of Mount Sumeru; he and is accompanied by the Yasha (Yakṣa) and Rasetu (Rākṣasa).



Ishana (NE; Īśāna). Another name of Śiva.



Nit (Sun; Sūrya, Āditya)



Gat (Moon; Candra)



Ji (Earth; Pṛthivī), guards downward direction



The Japanese version of the names is pronounced with *-ten* suffix. Thus Emma-ten is Yama-deva.

Spiritual States

In addition to the devas (the highest expression of the tattvas) are other spiritual states that represent other mixed states of being. According to the Lotus Sūtra, they may be viewed as part of the human nature in the sequence: Deva, Garuḍa, Yakṣa, Gandharva, Kinnara, Asura, Nāga, Mahoraga, where the spectrum ranges from the celestial to the terrestrial. There is an opposition at the ends, such as between Deva and Mahoraga (great attachment); Garuḍa and Nāga; Yakṣa and Asura; and Gandharva and Kinnara. These eight classes are called the *Hachibushu* in Japanese.

Tenbu (Skt: Deva) The devas (Indra is their chief) reside in heaven. These 33 gods of the Vedas control the world of desire. Above them is the Heaven of *Brahmā* (the spiritual

world pure of desire), including the Four Heavens of Meditation in the Realm of Form and the Fourfold Realm of Formlessness. The devas are also known as the Suras (those having the ambrosia).

Ryu (Skt: Nāga). Serpent-like creatures, these are spirits associated with water. They control rivers, lakes and seas, and they dwell deep in the ocean. They represent the instinctive forces of nature.



Naga King and Queen.
Exterior Niche, Cave 19, Ajanta.
Gupta period, late 5th Century CE.

Yasha (Skt: *Yakṣa*), guardian of directions and wealth. Originally asuras from the earth, the *Yakṣas* were later accepted by the *devas*. They are guardians of the earth's treasures and protectors of the gates and moats of their king *Kubera*. The picture below is from India.



Kendatsuba (Skt: *Gandharva*). They are celestial musicians to *Indra* and husbands of *apsarās*. *Dhṛtarāṣṭra* (Protector of the Nation - the Strong) is their lord. They are erotic and are the patrons of marriageable girls. The picture below is from the Nara National Museum.



Ashura (Skt: Asura). Demons, enemies of the devas and Indra, with whom they are forever at war. They are the aspects of our nature that take the body to be the sole self. They thrive on ambition, anger and jealousy. They represent our personal demons. The representation below from Kofuku-ji temple, Nara (8th century), with three heads and six arms, is made of lacquer. The Asura here is seen as defender of Dharma.



Karura (Skt: Garuḍa) It is the enemy and devourer of serpents (Nāgas). It is the vehicle of Viṣṇu and it carries the wish-fulfilling (*cintāmaṇi*) gem around its neck. Below, left, is an Early Javanese (11th century) illustration of Viṣṇu riding Garuda. He is shown with a human body but the wings and face/beak of an eagle. The image on the right is from Japan.



Kinnara (Skt: Kinnara). They have the heads of men and bodies of birds or horses. They are also musicians like the Gandharvas.



Magoraka (Skt: Mahoraga). He embodies uncontrolled attachment, and pictured as a monstrous snake. He is ‘*human but not human.*’



Mahōraga

Mahākāla (Daikokuten)

Mahākāla is Time incarnate, who is either Death or the divinity who helps one deal with potential disaster and death (like Yama for Naciketā in Katha Upaniṣad). Thus Daikokuten as Mahākāla is the patron god of farmers and peasants. He is identified with the Shinto figure *Okuninushi no Mikoto*. In western Japan, Daikoku is identified with the protection of the ricefields and worshiped as the god of agriculture. On his chest he has a golden sun disk and in his hand he holds a magic mallet (with male and female symbols) which fulfils all wishes. His familiar is the rat, and he is a friend of children.

Kichijoten or *Kisshouten* (Lakṣmī)

Lakṣmī is the consort of Viṣṇu and is the goddess of fortune. The goddess of luck and of beauty, she is the patroness of song and dance, and protectress of the geishas. She is the sister of the war god Bishamon.



Benzaiten (Sarasvatī)



弁財天

She is the goddess of knowledge, patroness of music, and the fine arts (dancing, acting, visual). In India she carries the vīṇā, and in Japan she carries the biwa (a short-necked lute that is related to the Chinese pipa). Sarasvatī is also the River Goddess and so her shrines are almost invariably in the neighborhood of water -- the sea, a river, or a pond.

The Twelve Yakṣas (Juni-shinsho)

The Yakṣas are the warriors in the service of the guardian of wealth, the deva Kubera, and they are also the guardians of treasury and gardens.

Japanese name	Sanskrit	Symbols
Bikyara Taisho	Vikarāla	red; armed with a three-pointed vajra; boar
Shotora Taisho	Catura	blue; armed with mallet or sword; dog
Shindara Taisho	Sindūra	yellow; armed with rope or fly-whisk, pilgrim's staff rooster
Makora Taisho or Makura	Mahoraga	white; axe; monkey
Haira Taisho	Pajra	red; armed with mallet, a bow or arrow; sheep
Indara Taisho	Indra	red; armed with staff; horse
Sanchira Taisho	Śāṇḍilya	gray; armed with sword or conch shell; snake
Anira Taisho	Anila	red; armed with trident or arrow; dragon
Anchira	Andira	green; armed with mallet or fly-whisk; rabbit
Mekira	Mihira	yellow; armed with vajra; tiger
Basara Taisho or Bajira	Vajra	white; armed with sword; ox; the one who protects mankind, bringing people's aspirations to fruition
Kubira Taisho	Kumbhira	yellow; armed with vajra; rat

Conclusions

The Vedic devas are the creative forces of the spirit that help the individual connect with the Self. The Japanese religion, through its practices of the homa, abhiṣeka, and dhyāna, has maintained continuity with the original revelation. A more vital connection with the Vedas would lead to a discovery of new insights related to the central role of the devas in transformation and transcendence in the arts of Asia.

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