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Monika Dix

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# The *Mukaekō* Ritual at Taimadera: A Living Tradition of Medieval Japanese Pure Land Buddhism

Monika Dix, University of British Columbia

## Abstract

*This article examines the religious significance of the mukaekō, an annual performance ritual held at Taimadera, which commemorates Chūjōhime's attainment of rebirth in Amida's Pure Land. Focusing on the artistic, religious, historical, and social circumstances that contributed to the popularity of Pure Land Buddhism in the Kamakura period (1185-1333), the reasons behind early medieval Japanese society's aspiration of faith in Amida and the desire to be reborn in his Pure Land are explored. My discussion of the interrelationship of history and art examines how both faith in Amida and pictorial expressions of this faith inspired the creation of the mukaekō ritual. Through this analysis, I will show that the mukaekō is a living tradition of medieval Japanese Pure Land Buddhism and a unique embodiment of mutual influences of art, religion, and history.*

According to the vow of Amitābha Tathgata, he will come with many bodhisattvas and ten thousand monks, brilliant rays of light will shoot forth, and he will stand right before your eyes. At that time, the merciful Kannon, with hands of happiness, will offer a jewelled lotus dais and appear in front of the devotee. The great Seishi and infinite hosts will say blessings together, and they will lead the devotee into the Western Paradise.<sup>1</sup>

These are the words of Japanese Tendai monk Eshin 惠心 (942-1017), also known as Genshin 源信. They describe a vision of salvation, referred to in Japanese as *raigō* 来迎, meaning “coming to welcome.” The Buddha of this *raigō* vision is Amida 阿弥陀 (Skt. Amitābha), who reigns over the Pure Land Western Paradise (Jōdo 浄土).<sup>2</sup> According to the *Three Pure Land Sūtras*, anyone who has faith in Amida will experience a similar vision at the

moment of death.<sup>3</sup> Although the *raigō* vision indicates death, it is not a sad vision, but rather one of joy. Amida and his hosts appear as saviours and guides, and upon Kannon's lotus dais, the soul of the dead is taken to the Pure Land to be reborn for a final time. The cycle of rebirth (Skt. *samsara*) is finally broken and salvation is achieved.

Every year in Japan this *raigō* vision comes to life in the form of the *mukaekō* 迎講, a performance ritual held at Taimadera 当麻寺. Taimadera is a temple of the Pure Land sect of Buddhism located in Taimachō 当麻町, Kitakatsuragi-gun 北葛城郡, Nara prefecture. The *mukaekō* honours the legendary eighth-century female figure, Chūjōhime 中将姫, who attained rebirth in Amida's Pure Land.

This article examines the religious significance of the *mukaekō* at Taimadera. Focusing on the artistic, religious, and socio-historical circumstances that contributed to the rise and popularity of Pure Land Buddhism in the late Heian (794-1185) and Kamakura (1185-1333) periods, I explore the reasons behind early medieval Japanese society's aspiration to faith in Amida and the desire to be reborn in his Pure Land. I also demonstrate that pictorial and performance art aid in the understanding of Buddhist doctrines and the re-reading of history. By interpreting the complex, historical interrelationships between religion and art, this study emphasises how this particular faith in Amida inspired Pure Land imagery and how, in turn, these pictorial expressions led to religious practice. In addition, I explore how these developments mutually inspire the *mukaekō* ritual in terms of its canonical and structural components. To what extent did Pure Land narrative and Pure Land *mandara* paintings contribute to the emergence of ritual performances such as the *mukaekō*? Through this analysis, I will show that the

<sup>1</sup> Allen Andrews, *The Teachings Essential for Rebirth: A Study of Genshin's Ōjōyōshū* (Tokyo: Sophia University, 1973), p. 15.

<sup>2</sup> In this paper, I have adopted the common usage of *Amida* and *Pure Land*.

<sup>3</sup> The *Three Pure Land Sūtras* are: the *Sūtra on the Buddha of Infinite Life* (*Muryōju-kyō* 無量寿經), the *Sūtra on the Buddha Amida* (*Amida-kyō* 阿弥陀經), and the *Sūtra on Contemplation of Amida* (*Kanmuryōju-kyō* 觀無量寿經). Hōnen (1133-1212), the founder of the Pure Land sect (Jōdo-shū 浄土宗), chose these three scriptures as the primary scriptures for Japanese Pure Land Buddhism. Inagaki Hisao, *The Three Pure Land Sūtras* (Kyoto: Nagata Bunshodō, 1995), p. 3.

*mukaekō* ritual derives from medieval Japanese Pure Land Buddhism and yet is a living tradition that uniquely blends art, religion, and history.

### The *Mukaekō* at Taimadera

The *mukaekō* at Taimadera takes place every year on May 14<sup>th</sup> to commemorate Chūjōhime's rebirth (*ōjō* 往生) into Amida's Pure Land.<sup>4</sup> This ritual is open to the public and takes place in front of Taimadera's main hall, the *mandaradō* 曼荼羅堂, which houses the *Taima Mandara* 当麻曼荼羅, the temple's central icon of worship.<sup>5</sup> Located in the west, the *mandaradō* symbolises the Pure Land where Amida and his hosts originate.<sup>6</sup> Opposite the *mandaradō*, is the *shabadō* 娑婆堂, which symbolises the defiled world of human existence, located in the east. During the *mukaekō* ritual, these two halls are connected by a wooden ramp (*raigōhashi* 来迎橋), the symbolic pathway on which Amida and his heavenly host descend to earth, greet the devotee, and ascend with the devotee from the terrestrial world to the Pure Land.

The *mukaekō* ritual begins at four o'clock in the afternoon with the first ringing of the temple bell.<sup>7</sup> In the *mandaradō*, the monks place a small wooden figure, which has been sculpted in a position of prayer and seated cross-legged on a lotus dais, within a larger wooden portrait sculpture of Chūjōhime. Together, these two sculptures are placed in a palanquin, which is then carried to the *shabadō*. Upon arrival at the *shabadō*, the portrait sculpture of Chūjōhime is taken out of the palanquin and deposited on a pedestal facing the *mandaradō*.

Previous scholarship has put forth many theories regarding the identity of the small figure that is placed within the larger portrait sculpture of Chūjōhime. As mentioned by Grotenhuis, this figure has been variously interpreted as a representation of Amida, Chūjōhime as a nun, and Chūjōhime in the

guise of the bodhisattva Seishi.<sup>8</sup> From an iconographical viewpoint, it seems plausible that this small figure represents Amida in his esoteric form, known as *Amida of the Five Kalpas* (*Gokōshiyui Amida* 五劫思惟阿弥陀), because the figure, who sits cross-legged and holds its hands in a gesture of prayer, wears a crown. However, other theories, more closely related to the meaning of the *mukaekō* and to Chūjōhime's legend, contradict this attribution. The *Three Pure Land Sūtras* and Genshin's *Ōjōyōshū* 往生要集, canonical sources that outline the practices essential for attaining salvation in Amida's Pure Land, emphasise that, at the moment of death, the devotee is greeted by Amida's heavenly host. The devotee's soul is placed on Kannon's lotus dais and carried to the Pure Land. This is exactly what happens during the *mukaekō* ritual. Based on this evidence and the fact that this figure is invisible to the audience until the peak of the ritual – the moment of Chūjōhime's death – I



Figure 1. Twenty-five musical bodhisattvas descending from the *andaradō* to the *shabadō* along the *raigōhashi*. The *mukaekō* at Taimadera, May 15, 1999.

propose that this small wooden figure is the embodiment of Chūjōhime's soul.

Upon the second ringing of the temple bell, the monks return from the *shabadō* to the *mandaradō*, where both Pure Land and Shingon monks recite prayers and invocations in praise of Amida in front of the *Taima mandara*. While the Pure Land monks chant the *nembutsu* 念佛, by repeating the phrase *Namu Amida Butsu* 南無阿弥陀仏 (*Hail to the Buddha Amida*), the Shingon sect monks chant the

<sup>4</sup> Gorai Shigeru, *Shūkyō sei ji ki* (Tokyo: Kodagawa shoten, 1982), p. 101.

<sup>5</sup> In this paper, I will use the Japanese term *mandara* rather than the Sanskrit term *mandala*.

<sup>6</sup> The *mandaradō* is also referred to as the *Hall of Ultimate Bliss* (*gokurakudō* 極楽堂) because Amida's Pure Land is also called *Western Paradise of Ultimate Bliss* (*gokuraku* 極樂).

<sup>7</sup> The description of the *mukaekō* ritual is based on my own observation of this ceremony at Taimadera in May 1999.

<sup>8</sup> Elizabeth ten Grotenhuis, 'Visions of a Transcendent Realm: Pure Land Images in the Cleveland Museum of Art', *Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art*, vol.78, no.7 (1991), p. 275.

*Amida Nyorai Daiju* 阿弥陀如来大寿, an esoteric *mantra* in honour of Amida.<sup>9</sup>

On the third sounding of the bell, the Shingon monks protect the *mandaradō* with a ritual fire, while the Pure Land monks walk down the *raigōhashi* towards the *shabadō*, where they assemble and prepare for the arrival of the heavenly host. With the fourth ringing of the bell, the sound of traditional Japanese *gagaku* 雅楽 music marks the beginning of the descent. Following the procession of forty-eight children, representing the forty-eight vows of Amida,<sup>10</sup> are twenty-five bodhisattvas playing musical instruments (Fig.1).<sup>11</sup> Kannon 観音, the bodhisattva of mercy, identified by carrying a lotus dais, and Seishi 勢至, the bodhisattva representing the power and wisdom of Amida, identified by holding his hands in prayer, follow.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Originally founded as a Pure Land sect temple, Taimadera has been controlled by both the Pure Land sect and the Shingon sect since the fifteenth century. Toshio Fukuyama, 'Taimadera no rekishi', *Bukkyō Geijutsu* 45 (1960), pp. 1-4.

<sup>10</sup> Amida, while he was still a bodhisattva, meditated for five *kalpas* (Indian eons) before making his forty-eight vows to save all sentient beings. The eighteenth vow, in which Amida declares that when he has attained the Buddha nature, any beings who call on him and wish to be reborn in his Pure Land will be heard, is the most important. Louis Frederic, *Buddhism: Flammarion Iconographic Guides* (Paris: Imprimeurs Tours, 1995), p. 315.

<sup>11</sup>The appearance of these twenty-five musical bodhisattvas is of great interest to art historians because this number, give or take one, has developed into a standard iconographical representation for late Heian and early Kamakura *raigō* paintings that seems to have been inspired by Genshin. However, doctrinal sources such as the *Three Pure Land Sūtras* do not specify a fixed number of bodhisattvas to accompany Amida. What then is the significance of these twenty-five bodhisattvas? Why did they become standard iconographical conventions in *raigō* paintings and in the *mukaekō* ritual? According to Okazaki, Genshin composed a hymn, called *Hymn to the Twenty-five Bodhisattvas*, in which he refers to each deity by name and by their instruments. Genshin based this Hymn to the Twenty-five Bodhisattvas on the *Ju ōjō amida bukkoku-kyō*, a Chinese Buddhist scripture that describes the vision of Amida in which he is accompanied by twenty-five bodhisattvas who enhance rebirth in the Pure Land when worshiped. However, this Chinese scripture turned out to be a forgery. Jōji Okazaki, *Pure Land Buddhist Paintings* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1977), pp. 114-116.

<sup>12</sup> Both Kannon and Seishi are the principal attendants of Amida. When depicted in paintings or sculptures as an

Lastly, Fugen 普賢, the Bodhisattva of Universal Virtue, descends holding a canopy.<sup>13</sup>

Upon the heavenly host's arrival at the *shabadō*, the monks sing a hymn in praise of Amida. Seishi transfers the small figure from the large, portrait sculpture of Chūjōhime to Kannon's lotus dais (Fig.2). Kannon then leads the entourage of monks, celestial children, musical bodhisattvas, Seishi, and Fugen to the ascent of the *mandaradō*. In the meantime, a statue of Amida has been positioned in front of the *mandaradō*, symbolising his welcome of the devotee to the Pure Land. The entire performance lasts about one hour. When the heavenly host ascends to the *mandaradō*, the sun is beginning to set. This further enhances the feeling of departing the terrestrial realm in order to enter the celestial world, emulating Chūjōhime at the moment of her death. The canonical texts and the precise process of re-enacting Chūjōhime's rebirth into Amida's Pure Land during the *mukaekō* ritual are evidence that not only is the small wooden figure in the Chūjōhime portrait sculpture an embodiment of her soul, it is her soul that will be reborn.

### Iconographical Context: *Taima Mandara Engi Emaki*, Pure Land Mandaras, and Pure Land Paintings

The *mukaekō* ritual, in which the community of Taimadera at Taimachō becomes transformed by masks, music, and dance to re-live the moment of Chūjōhime's rebirth into Amida's Pure Land, was first performed in the mid twelfth century. What are the origins of the *mukaekō* at Taimadera? How does this specific case of Chūjōhime's rebirth in Amida's Pure Land reflect medieval Japanese's society's perceptions of death and rebirth in the late Heian and early Kamakura periods? What artistic influences gave rise to the iconographical components of the *mukaekō*?

The earliest extant textual and pictorial illustration of the history of Taimadera and the legendary eighth-century female figure, Chūjōhime, is the *Taima Mandara Engi Emaki*

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Amida triad, the central figure of Amida is always flanked on the right by Kannon and on the left by Seishi. In addition to holding a lotus dais, Kannon is also iconographically distinguished by having a small image of Amida (*kebutsu* 化仏) in his crown.

<sup>13</sup> Fugen is called the Bodhisattva of Universal Virtue because he offers salvation for everyone, especially for women. Chapter twenty-eight of the *Lotus Sūtra* is dedicated to the bodhisattva Fugen.

当麻曼荼羅縁起絵巻 (*Miraculous Origin of the Taima Mandara*). The *Taima Mandara Engi Emaki* narrative begins with the founding of Taimadera by Prince Maroko, the third son of Emperor Yōmei (r. 585 -587). The textual passages then discuss the



Figure 2. The sculpture of Chūjōhime is placed on Kannon's lotus dais. The *mukaekō* at Taimadera, May 15, 1999.

religious aspirations of Chūjōhime, daughter of the eighth-century nobleman, Yokohagi Toyonari, who copied a thousand scrolls of the *Lotus Sūtra* and dedicated them to Taimadera.

The narrative relates that on the fifteenth day of the sixth month of the seventh year of Tempyō Hōji (763), Chūjōhime took the tonsure of a nun at Taimadera and set herself a limit of seven days to realise her vow of seeing Amida in living form. Seven days later, a mysterious nun appeared and asked Chūjōhime to collect lotus stems to be spun into threads. Together they dyed these threads into five colours. Shortly after, a female weaver appeared and, in a single night, wove the threads into the *Taima Mandara*. After explaining the meaning of the *Taima Mandara* to Chūjōhime, the weaver ascended to the Pure Land on a five-coloured cloud.<sup>14</sup> Immediately following this miracle, the nun also ascended to the Pure Land. Witnessing these

<sup>14</sup> The five colours (*goshiki* 五色) are blue, red, white, black and yellow. In the pictorial illustrations of the *Taima Mandara Engi Emaki* these five colours appear in the *Taima Mandara* and also on the cloud that transports the nun to the Pure Land. The five-coloured cloud is one of the esoteric attributes of the bodhisattva Kannon. This aspect is significant because the female weaver in the *Taima Mandara Engi Emaki* descending on this cloud is a human manifestation of Kannon.

miraculous transformations, Chūjōhime realised that the weaver was Kannon and the nun Amida, having appeared to her in their apparitional bodies (*keshin* 化身). Inspired by the fulfillment of her vow, she devoted the rest of her life to the worship of Amida and the invocation of his name in front of the *Taima Mandara*. At the moment of Chūjōhime's death in 775, Amida and his heavenly host welcomed her to the Pure Land (Fig.3).

As is evident from this story, there are striking similarities between the textual and visual illustrations in the *Taima Mandara Engi Emaki* and the *mukaekō* ritual at Taimadera. These include: the descent of Amida's host to Chūjōhime, her welcome by Amida into the Pure Land, the portrayal of Kannon, Seishi, and Fugen descending to Chūjōhime, and Kannon offering her a golden lotus dais. Therefore, the *Taima Mandara Engi Emaki* is an illustrated handscroll that represents a "pictorial prototype" of the *mukaekō*. The key elements of this narrative are also the essentials for attaining rebirth in Amida's Pure Land that constitute the structural elements and highlights of the *mukaekō* ritual.

But what was the incentive for Chūjōhime's legend? While the *Taima Mandara Engi Emaki* tells us a great deal about the attainment of rebirth in Amida's Pure Land, it fails however to tell us why faith in Amida and rebirth in his Pure Land had such a great appeal to medieval Japanese society. In order to shed light on this issue, we need to look at the *Taima Mandara*, one of the Pure Land *mandaras*, which is an iconographic diagram of Amida's Pure Land.

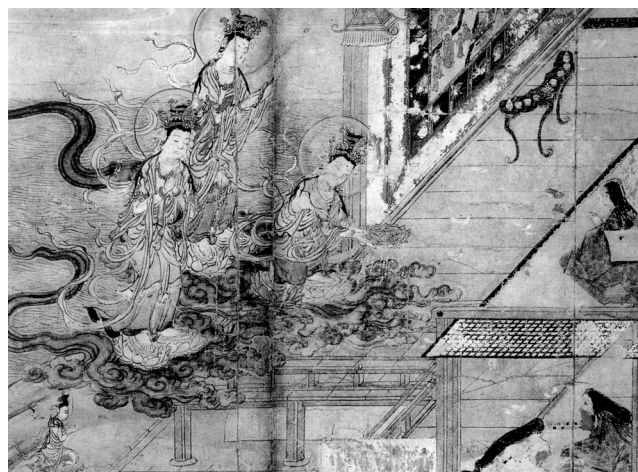


Figure 3. Detail of the *Taima Mandara Engi Emaki* showing the heavenly host descending. Kamakura Kokuhōkan, Kamakura, February 4, 2003.

Visual representations of Amida's Pure Land accompanied the development of Pure Land thought. Paintings depicting the descent of Amida and his host, called *raigō-zū* 来迎図, and cosmic diagrams showing Amida's Pure Land, called *Jōdo Mandara* 浄土曼荼羅, became increasingly popular from the late Heian period onwards. The *Taima Mandara*, (Fig.4) of great importance for the history of Taimadera and the story of Chūjōhime's rebirth, is the oldest surviving pictorial representation of Amida's Pure Land in Japan. A close analysis of this thirteenth-century Pure Land imagery (*jōdo hensō* 浄土変相) offers a glimpse into Amida's paradise, so much desired as an escape from worldly suffering by medieval Japanese society.

The visual illustration of the *Taima Mandara* is based on the *Sūtra on Contemplation of Amida* (*Kanmuryōju-kyō* 観無量寿經), which is one of the *Three Pure Land Sūtras*. Key passages from this canonical text are found in the inscriptions framing each scene in the three outer rows of illustrations that surround the central section of the *mandara*. The central section of the *Taima Mandara* is referred to as the *Court of the Central Doctrine* (*gengibun* 玄義分), and it is based on the first four chapters in Shan-tao's commentary (*C. Kuang-ching-su*) on the *Kanmuryōju-kyō*.<sup>15</sup> The *gengibun* depicts Amida in the center forming the *raigō mūdra*, the hand gesture which welcomes the devotee into the Pure Land, and sitting in front of glorious palatial architecture. He is surrounded by Kannon and Seishi, as well as by a multitude of bodhisattvas; all of them are depicted seated on lotus dais. While bodhisattvas on clouds descend above Amida, below him is a pond around which heavenly beings dance and play musical instruments.

This central section of the *Taima Mandara* is framed by three rows of pictures. The outer row on the left, known as the *Court of the Prefatory Legend* (*jobungi* 序分義), conveys the legendary story of the Indian prince Ajatasatru, who was incited to arrest his father and to starve him to death. However, Ajatasatru's mother, Queen Vaidehi, secretly brought food to her husband, an act for which she was imprisoned. Due to the queen's deep veneration for Sakyamuni Buddha, she prayed for him to lead her into a safe place away from the world of suffering, upon which Sakyamuni appeared before her to show

her visions of various Buddhist paradises. Sakyamuni taught Vaidehi a series of sixteen contemplations through which she could achieve rebirth in her chosen paradise: Amida's Pure Land.<sup>16</sup>

Thirteen of these sixteen contemplations are depicted on the right of the *Taima Mandara*, in the *Court of Specific Contemplations* (*jōzengi* 序善義). In front of each object of contemplation appears a kneeling figure of Queen Vaidehi. These contemplations focus on the jeweled ponds, the palatial architecture, and the celestial music in Amida's Pure Land. The final three of these sixteen contemplations are divided into nine grades (*kuhon* 九品)<sup>17</sup> of rebirth, determined by the qualities of the devotee. These are shown in the horizontal row, located beneath the *Taima Mandara*, called the *Court of General Contemplations* (*sanzengi* 三善義), and provide incentive for moral behaviour on earth, while expressing hope for salvation to sinners. These nine grades of rebirth (*kuhon ōjō* 九品往生) are depicted through the various *raigō* visions specific to devotees of the different grades. Those who are reborn into the highest grade (*jōbon* 上品) see a vision of Amida and his entire host of bodhisattvas descending on clouds at the moment of death. Those reborn into the middle grade (*chūbon* 中品) see a lesser number of bodhisattvas and Amida does not descend with them. Those reborn into the lowest grade (*gebon* 下品) see neither a vision of Amida, nor of descending bodhisattvas.

The story of Queen Vaidehi shows certain similarities to the story of Chūjōhime. It reflects the desire to be reborn in Amida's Pure Land in order to escape worldly suffering, something Heian and Kamakura-period society also strove for. Like Queen Vaidehi, Chūjōhime aspired to rebirth in the Pure Land and practiced contemplation on Amida and the Pure Land *sūtras*. At the moment of death, she experienced a *raigō* vision of Amida's descent, which is emphasised in both the *Taima Mandara Engi Emaki* and in the *mukaekō*.

Certain pictorial elements in the *Taima Mandara Engi Emaki* and in the *mukaekō* do not seem to fit the iconographical conventions of the *Taima Mandara*.

<sup>15</sup>Shan-tao 善導 (613-681) was the third Chinese Pure Land patriarch. He exerted the greatest influence on Pure Land Buddhism in Japan. Inagaki, *The Three Pure Land Sūtras*, p.106.

<sup>16</sup> Elizabeth ten Grotenhuis, 'Rebirth of an Icon: The *Taima Mandala* in Medieval Japan', *Archives of Asian Art*, no. 36 (1983), p.61.

<sup>17</sup>According to the *Kanmuryōju-kyō*, three levels of welcoming exist, and each level is further subdivided into three grades of people, corresponding to the qualities of the believer. For each of these nine grades a specific variation of Amida's *raigō mudrā* exists.

In the illustrated handscroll and the performance ritual, Amida stands amidst mountains but does not descend with his host, and there is also the unique appearance of musical bodhisattvas. According to the *Kanmuryōju-kyō* and the illustration of the nine grades of rebirth in the *Taima Mandara's* lower border, the descent of a reduced group of bodhisattvas without Amida indicates that the person belongs to the *chūbon* grade of rebirth. People of this grade were generally householders and common folk, possessing the Buddha nature and practicing Buddhist precepts to the best of their abilities. According to this iconographic interpretation, Chūjōhime belonged to the *chūbon* grade. However, since the legend presents her as a pious woman who, out of deep devotion to Amida left her home and took the tonsure as a nun, it would be more likely to assume that she belonged to the *jōbon* grade. People in the *jōbon* grade have departed from ordinary, worldly life to become nuns and monks, and have aroused the Buddha nature. Accepting this viewpoint, it raises the question as to why we do not see Amida descending together with the bodhisattvas in the *Taima Mandara Engi Emaki* and in the *mukaekō*?

The various leaders of Pure Land Buddhism in medieval Japan, such as Genshin 源信 (942-1017), Hōnen 法然 (1133-1212), and Ippen 一遍 (1239-1289), and their respective interpretations of the Pure Land *sūtras*, combined with the growing simplification of practice, and the increasing emphasis on faith as the only necessary means for salvation, created a situation where *raigō* paintings were no longer confined to *mandara* depictions. These works developed into an independent genre of Buddhist painting in the early Kamakura period. Amida is depicted amidst the mountains in both the *Taima Mandara Engi Emaki* and in the *mukaekō*. The *Yamagoshi raigō-zū* 山越来迎図 painting genre, which depicts Amida and his host coming across the mountains to greet the devotee, may be used to explain the seemingly incongruous influence of the manuscript illustration on the *mukaekō* performance. Illustrations of the *yamagoshi raigō-zu* lack certain narrative elements, such as the depiction of the dying devotee and his or her dwelling. Instead, *yamagoshi raigō-zu* serve as objects of worship, which enable them to make their appeal directly to the viewer. Based on the tenets of the *Kanmuryōju-kyō*, one of the sixteen contemplations describes the reflection on the setting sun. The Heian period literary genre, called *Tales of Rebirth* (*ōjōden* 往生伝), like the one of *Oe no Sadamoto*, state that “music is heard above

the clouds; Amida's heavenly multitude comes to greet the believer as the sun sets”.<sup>18</sup> In addition, another genre of independent *raigō* paintings, the *shōju raigō-zu* 聖衆来迎図 (Fig.5), sheds light on the presence of the twenty-five bodhisattvas in both the *Taima Mandara Engi Emaki* and in the *mukaekō*.<sup>19</sup> This particular genre of *shōju raigō-zu*, became extremely popular with Genshin and his interpretation of the *Pure Land Sūtras*. In important ways, therefore, the study of the interactions and influences of visual sources assists in the interpretation of subsequent works of art.



Figure 4. The *Taima Mandara*. Copy of the original tapestry at Taimadera Tokushoji Temple, Arita, Wakayama Prefecture, March 17, 2003.

### Socio-Historical Context: Pure Land Doctrine of Salvation and Teachings of Genshin

In addition to the iconographical influences of Pure Land paintings on the *mukaekō* performance ritual, socio-historical context suggests additional influences of historical and doctrinal promotions of faith in Amida and the desire to be born in his Pure Land. Along with its significance for the history of Taimadera and the origin of the *mukaekō*, Chūjōhime's narrative also serves as an account of the ideas regarding death and rebirth in early medieval Japan. What inspired medieval Japanese society to have faith in Amida? How did pictorial illustrations of Amida's descent, such as those

<sup>18</sup> Frederic Kotas, 'Ōjōden: Accounts of Rebirth in The Pure Land' (Ph.D. Dissertation, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1987), p. 52.

<sup>19</sup> Okazaki, *Pure Land Buddhist Painting*, p. 62.

depicted in the *Taima Mandara Engi Emaki*, arise in conjunction with the Pure Land doctrine of salvation? And how did these visual images influence and shape *raigō* performances such as the *mukaekō*?

Pure Land Buddhism was first transmitted from China to Japan in the seventh century.<sup>20</sup> However, it was not until the emergence of the Tendai sect in the Heian period, particularly under Saichō 最澄 (767-822), that Pure Land Buddhism underwent a change and became a popular faith among all classes of society. Although it is not quite clear what caused this transition from an ancestor cult to a religion of personal salvation, certain socio-political, historical and religious events are considered to have been the reasons for this change. The corruption of the clergy, political instabilities, power struggles, wars, famines, and natural disasters at the end of the Heian and the beginning of the Kamakura periods caused medieval Japanese society to believe that the *Age of the Final Law* (*mappō* 末法) had come.

According to Buddhist thought, the time period after the death of the historical Buddha, Sakyamuni, is divided into three ages. In the first, known as *The Age of the Perfect Law* (*shōbō* 正法), people followed the teachings of the Buddha correctly. The second period, called *The Age of the Degenerative Law* (*zōbō* 像法), was characterised by a degeneration of the Buddha's teachings, failure to understand the true inner meaning of the Buddhist

Law, and an increased difficulty for people to attain enlightenment. In *The Age of the Final Law* (*mappō* 末法), which is believed to have begun in 1052 and to last until Miroku 弥勒, the Buddha of the future arrives bringing salvation, the practice of the teachings cannot be carried out and salvation becomes impossible.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, medieval Japanese society needed and aspired to a faith that could offer them a promising, glorious life after death as well as an escape from their worldly sufferings.

The “fragility of life” began to be deeply felt by Heian society, and even more by Kamakura society. Apart from the socio-political instabilities in the country, famines and natural disasters, medieval Japanese literary sources indicate that life was also often cut short by illness and death during childbirth. The aristocrats, though powerful and wealthy, realised their mortality and sought for ways to come to terms with death. Pure Land Buddhism provided them with comforting guidance, allaying their fears and anxieties, for, according to Buddhist Law, being mortal should not be considered an inferior condition; all sentient beings have the potential to attain enlightenment through right practice and faith in the *dharma*.

The early schools of Buddhism, which were transmitted to Japan in the sixth and seventh centuries, were quite complex and demanding. For example, practitioners strictly adhered to monastic devotees were required to be monks or nuns. The



Figure 5. *Amida Shōju Raigō-zu*

<sup>20</sup> Andrews (1977), p. 15.

<sup>21</sup> Michele Marra, ‘The Development of *Mappō* Thought in Japan (I)’, *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, vol. 15, no. 1 (1988), p. 25.

rules and only way that one could achieve merit and salvation was through the commissioning of religious artifacts and the copying of the sutras. All of the above required a certain level of education and monetary means, the reserve of the upper classes or the clergy. In contrast to these early schools of Buddhism, Pure Land Buddhism appealed to medieval Japanese society because it was comprised of the simple practice of chanting Amida's name, accessible to everybody - clergy and laymen, rich and poor, the educated as well as the illiterate.<sup>22</sup> This form of devotion could be performed at any time, in any place, did not demand much effort on behalf of the worshipper, and promised devotees a glorious life after death in the Pure Land. Particularly with the emergence of various Pure Land advocates such as Kūya (904-972), Hōnen (1133-1212), Shinran (1173-1262) and Ippen (1239-1289), faith in Amida spread throughout the nation and people from all classes of society turned to it because the simple practice of chanting the *nembutsu* offered an easy path of salvation, accessible and rewarding to even the ordinary person (*bombu* 凡夫).

Genshin was instrumental in the promotion of Pure Land faith for the sake of personal salvation.<sup>23</sup> Through the *Ōjōyōshū*, Genshin's treatise on the essential practices required for rebirth in Amida's Pure Land, dated 984, visions of Amida's Pure Land were promoted and shaped, both textually and visually. This manual of practices was reinforced by faith and was intended for everybody who considered themselves "common people" before Amida. The result of the believer's faith in Amida and the practice of the *nembutsu* was the *raigō* vision

<sup>22</sup> Aristocrats in particular were entranced by the promise of a life after death in a paradisiacal world. Based on the textual and visual imagery, such as the *Taima Mandara*, they created sumptuous palaces and gardens on earth, blurring the border between the terrestrial and the celestial worlds. The Phoenix Hall (*Byōdō-in* 平等院) at Uji illustrates this point. In 1052, Fujiwara Yorimichi built this temple, which houses a large wooden sculpture of Amida as its central icon of worship. The interior doors of this hall are painted. They depict scenes of Amida and his heavenly hosts descending on clouds and playing musical instruments. The architectural ground plan of the *Byōdō-in* consists of a pond and a temple hall located behind it. This architectural structure resembles Amida's Pure Land Paradise as depicted in the *Taima Mandara*.

<sup>23</sup> This "new" faith was also developed by Ennin 円仁 (794-864), who transmitted a form of musical *nembutsu*, called *goe nembutsu* 声念仏 from China to Japan. The *goe nembutsu* is a musical chanting ritual of Amida's name derived from the five tones of Amida's name.

of Amida and his host descending down to earth to greet the devotee at the moment of death. Rather than striving for the extinction of a person's ego (*nirvana*) in this world, Genshin emphasised rebirth in Amida's Pure Land as the easiest accessible way to attain enlightenment.

According to Genshin, faith, which he defined as a sincere mind, strong belief, and a longing to be reborn with unselfish dedication of merit towards others, was the primary prerequisite for achieving salvation in Amida's Pure Land. Even though Genshin retained certain esoteric elements in his Pure Land teachings and stressed the practice of meditation, as a Tendai monk, his faith and practice formed the basis for Hōnen and Shinran's Pure Land doctrines. They, however, considered faith in Amida as the sole necessity in the attainment of salvation.

## Conclusion

The significance of the *mukaekō* ritual at Taimadera results from specific influences in early medieval Japanese society. Complex interrelationships existed among art, history, and religious belief, some of which can be known today. Buddhist belief in *mappō* encouraged faith in Amida, and Genshin and his followers' Pure Land doctrines inspired different iconographical conventions to communicate the practices of personal salvation. Pure Land imagery offered devotees a vision of Amida's glorious paradise, the ideal refuge from worldly suffering, and Pure Land paintings exerted influence on performance art such as the *mukaekō* ritual. Furthermore, these artistic conventions inspired beliefs and practices. Demonstrating faith in Amida came to consist of chanting Amida's name, an attainable practice that guaranteed salvation.

The most important aspect of Pure Land Buddhism was the all-inclusive concept of salvation, regardless of class and gender. This aspect is emphasised pictorially in both the *Taima Mandara* and the *Taima Mandara Engi Emaki*, and continues to be celebrated annually in form of the *mukaekō* ritual. The consideration of the complex context for the canonical and structural components of the *mukaekō* ritual reveals a trace of the past that can be followed today.

\*The images used to illustrate this article (Figures 1-5.) were provided by the author, Monika Dix. They are from her private collection.

# The Tree on White Mountain: On Ritual, Spirit and Place

Alison Pryer, University of British Columbia

## Abstract

*In this autobiographical essay, I reflect on the healing and transformational power of ritual. Here, ritual is perceived as a holistic form of communication that incorporates and unites the material human body, the physical earth, and the non-tangible realms of emotion, intuition, spirit, and thought. The processes of ritual rebalance the flow of energy between and within these diverse elements, and act as a catalyst for change in the participant's consciousness. Thus, a ritualised act can change the very order of the world itself.*

*The performance of the personal ritual described in this essay was sparked by my grief over the death of someone I loved very much – my mother. The symptoms of my grief were a physical expression of my lack of knowledge about how to live after her death, and did not diminish until I had turned myself over fully to the practice of the ritual. The ritual itself was a simple one: a daily walk up a mountain path to sit in a particular tree. Indeed, at the time, I did not think of this daily act as ritual. Nonetheless, the performance of the ritual honoured and reconnected me to early childhood memories of my mother, and to the earth's body, and also permitted me to recognise and engage with the anima locus, or place soul, of the mountain tree.*

I was so far away from my mother when she was dying that we had no chance to say goodbye. After the funeral in London, overcome by grief and guilt, I could think only of times past and how much I wanted to be with her. Though I returned to my job in Japan with my new husband, I seemed to forget about life as a newlywed and began to suffer from headaches and dizziness. My doctor in Japan diagnosed low blood pressure, and gave me a prescription for some little white pills, which I didn't take.

While in London for the funeral, I happened to see a book on my mother's shelf by my physician, Christine Page. I read how traditional healers believe that breaking primal relationships with the earth leads to sickness, which manifests itself as mental or physical illness. In Tibet, healers often prescribe walks in the forest as a cure for depression because reconnecting with the natural world is seen as a

healing act. For illnesses such as low blood pressure that are thought to be caused by 'soul loss,' they advise sufferers to find a tree and physically connect with the energy that flows from the earth, up through the roots and into the trunk.

I decided to try this traditional cure for low blood pressure. After all what did I have to lose? I made sure not to tell anyone about my plans and secretly slipped away to walk in the forest on Shiroyama, the White Mountain, which lay just five minutes from where I lived. As a child growing up in Scotland I seemed to know almost every tree, rock, hollow, and stream within a mile's radius of my family's house, but like most grown-ups in a fast-paced world I had lost this intimate connection with my own habitat. Now all of the trees on the mountain seemed unfamiliar to me even though I had hiked this route many times before. I climbed slowly looking for the perfect tree, a tree that seemed to be inviting.

The forest backed an ancient Shinto temple, and it was also the famed setting of a local warrior's adventurous evasion of an enemy army. The local people had cherished this forest for generations. None of its trees had ever been cut down for commercial use. Indeed, most of the trees on the mountain were many hundreds of years old. I climbed on and on searching for a tree. Just when I thought that I would have to look elsewhere, there it was, some distance away from the stony path: a huge, ancient cedar. It looked as if it were the oldest tree on the mountain. The root system was colossal. The main trunk was dark and dead, and the bare branches reached high into the sky. Perhaps the tree had been hit by lightning? The old trunk was completely hollow. I'm sure I could have crawled in and then stood to my full height, but I was too scared of the bats, snakes and spiders that might call the hollow home to venture inside. From the base of this lifeless central body, however, sprang another giant living trunk – a whole new tree. One of its strong branches swung down in a low arc, broad and smooth. It was the perfect place to sit. Reclining was even more comfortable, and as I laid back against the branch, looking up at the light dappling through the swaying green canopy, the tree seemed to cradle me. I felt welcome here.

I came up to my secret forest cradle every day. One day, a snow-white cat stepped out in front of me

at a hairpin turn in the crooked path and stretched its tail upwards, as if in greeting. “Hello, cat,” I said, a little afraid of the feral feline. In response, the sleek, muscular cat meowed quietly and then rubbed its body against my shins. I gingerly stepped over it and set off for my special tree. The cat followed. When I stopped, she stopped. It was clear the cat wanted to walk with me. Again, I set off, and the cat accompanied me up the mountain until the tree was in sight. Then she disappeared into the undergrowth. Every day after that, the cat, whom I began to call Shiro (which means “White” in Japanese) would appear at the same spot on the twisting mountain path, as if she had been expecting my arrival. From there, I would be escorted by my white feline spirit guide up the twisting mountain path to within sight of my healing tree.

One of my earliest memories is of my mother taking me to a London park near our home. Lying in my stroller, I looked up at the sunlight playing on the leaves of an old elm. Now, many years later, in the forest of Shiroyama, I lay back on a huge cedar branch like a baby in a cradle. Bathed in dappled light I dreamt of nothing in particular and let my thoughts simply come and go, relishing my solitude, soothed by the sounds of the mountain forest. As I relaxed into the cedar’s bark skin, the energy of the welcoming tree branch flowed along my spine, and revitalised my whole body.

A week after I began my daily walks up to the mountain tree, my blood pressure returned to normal. I was still grieving for my mother, but with the assistance of the spirit of the wild white cat, my mountain guide, I was able to tap into the life energy flowing through that ancient, knowing, half-dead, half-living tree. By performing this personal ritual on White Mountain, I once again felt reenergised and in friendship with the earth, and willing to accept the inevitable, cyclical nature of life and death.

Even though I felt well, I continued to climb the mountain regularly to visit my tree, accompanied by the gentle Shiro. When I said goodbye to Japan eighteen months later I missed the tree and Shiro more than many of my human friends. But I was able to leave the country feeling more complete, and more fully connected to the earth’s body. It was through this healing ritual that I was able to accept my mother’s death, the inevitability of change, and my season of loss. I could now understand these concepts in a wholly embodied way. Through ritualised performance, I had infused the routine walk up the mountain to the tree with sacred meaning, and had come to know the mystery of the sacral, opening my heart to its daily lessons.