

INTRODUCTION

These tales from medieval Japan are by turns curious, touching, disturbing, funny, gross, and sublime. No doubt they will give everyone who reads them a different impression, but I think first of how civilized they are. There have never been better losers than the Palace Guards in no. [8](#), who laugh wholeheartedly at their own awful discomfiture; and no warrior was ever wiser than the hero of no. [67](#). Most people in the stories are quick to laugh or cry but slow to kill or seek revenge, and their gods (with a few local exceptions) are kind.

Nearly all the stories come from tale collections put together between about A.D. 1100 and 1350, though the earliest (no. [106](#)) was written down in the early 700s and the most recent (no. [209](#)) in 1578. Most tell about things that happened in the two centuries between 850 and 1050, a classic period in Japanese civilization.

THE WORLD OF THE TALES

Nowadays we associate tales mainly with country people. No doubt villagers told tales in Japan a thousand years ago too, but if the aristocracy had not been equally fond of stories, the ones in this book would never have been written down. People's ideas about the world then were rather different from ours, and from those of the modern Japanese. It is true, for example, that fox lore still survives in Japan, and that possession by fox spirits is still a factor in a very few people's lives; but it has been a long time since someone like a regent could encourage such goings-on as those in no. [47](#). The rumor of a modern prime minister practicing fox magic would be too weird to make sense.

Even time was different then. Day and night were each divided into six "hours" which expanded and contracted as the seasons turned. Since the calendar was lunar, instead of solar like the modern world's, the "months" followed the moon's phases. That is why in this book I use the word "moon" instead of "month," for a

“moon” and a solar month are not the same. The New Year came sometime in our February, as it still does in the Chinese calendar today.

There was no fixed reference point in Japanese history comparable to the birth of Christ or the Hegira. Instead, the flow of the years was divided into “year periods,” which might range in length from a year or two to about twenty. Year periods did not correspond to the reign of an emperor or to anything else easy to describe, and they could start or stop at any time. Each had its own name: for example, Shōtai (898–901) and Engi (901–923). No. [171](#) tells how Yōrō (717–724) got its name. The people in charge of deciding year periods, and of all matters relating to the calendar, were top yin-yang diviners (see below) like the Kamo no Tadayuki of nos. [162](#) and [165](#). Of course, all dates in this book have been converted to the modern Western calendar.

People’s names, then as now in Japan, were written with the surname first, but they were a little different in other ways from their modern counterparts. For example, the full name of the regent in no. [47](#) is Fujiwara no Tadazane. “Fujiwara” is his family or clan name; “no” is a particle like the French *de* or the German *von*; and “Tadazane” is his personal name. In other words, Fujiwara no Tadazane means “Tadazane of the Fujiwara [clan].” Similar names are Minamoto no Yorinobu (no. [67](#)) and Tsunetzumi no Yasunaga (no. [130](#)). Names like these have about as much meaning as ours do — usually rather little.

The names of Buddhist monks and nuns are distinctive. In these stories a monk has only one name, usually the one he acquired on entering religion. Buddhist names often have some sort of fortunate meaning. In no. [101](#), for instance, Dōken (“Wise about the Way”) receives in a vision the new name Nichizō (“Sun-store”). Monks’ names sound quite different from laymen’s names, although both are written with Chinese characters, because they are pronounced according to entirely different principles.

THE CAPITAL AND THE PROVINCES

The center of Japan, about the year 1000, was “the Capital”: the city now known as Kyoto. It sprang up in 794 when the emperor

moved to the site from Nara (see below), and for centuries was practically the only city in the land. Among its roughly 100,000 inhabitants, those who “really mattered,” both men and women, probably numbered no more than a few thousand, but they gave a sort of glow to all the rest. Thanks to them the Capital, seen from the provinces, was a sort of Parnassus: the home of elegance, wit, romance, learning, the arts — in short, of all civilization. The rest of the population consisted of the lower aristocracy and officialdom, servants of many degrees, craftsmen, petty merchants, guards, priests, Buddhist monks of various kinds, etc. There seems also to have been a twilight zone, not outstandingly large, of assorted ne’er-do-wells and thieves. Government income came from dwindling crown lands; the aristocracy lived off the income from their growing private estates; and religious institutions prospered from pious donations and from their own landholdings. Nothing like a middle class developed until centuries later.

The streets of the Capital were laid out in the same regular grid pattern as the Chinese capital of the time. (Modern Kyoto is still patterned this way, although none of the buildings mentioned in these stories survive.) The major east-west avenues were numbered (First Avenue, Second Ave., etc.), while the north-south ones were named (East Omiya Avenue). Smaller, intermediate streets were also named (Horikawa Street).

The central north-south thoroughfare was Suzaku Avenue. It began at the Suzaku Gate, the central gate in the south wall of the palace compound, and ran down to the Rashō Gate, the central, southern gate into the city itself. The flute-playing demon of no. [167](#) lived high in the structure of the Suzaku Gate, and the Rashō Gate sheltered the equally musical demon-thief of no. [64](#).

Naturally the Imperial Palace occupied a commanding position in the city. Located at the north end of Suzaku Avenue, it was actually a complex of buildings inside a large, rectangular walled compound that occupied about three hundred acres. Within the compound were several hundred buildings including the emperor’s personal residence (in a sub-compound of its own), the various halls of government, and many other structures either functional or ceremonial. No. [59](#), for example, starts with a scene of gentlemen arriving at the palace, apparently for a council to be held near the Great Hall of State. In no. [207](#), a warrior of the Palace Guard

arranges to meet his colleagues by a gate at the northeast corner of the palace compound, while at the next gate south lurks the dastardly toad of no. [10](#).

Rivers flow on either side of Kyoto, east and west. To the east is the Kamo, which every visitor has seen. Riverside Palace (Kawara-no-in), where Retired Emperor Uda met the ghost (nos. [190](#), [191](#)), was on the west bank of the Kamo. To the west flows the deeper Katsura River, where two holy men (nos. [116](#), [161](#)) came to grief.

The city lies in a basin surrounded on three sides by mountains. This makes it miserably hot in summer, which is why the empress was wearing “a nearly transparent gown” when the hermit first glimpsed her in no. [125](#). Ladies often dressed that lightly in summer, at least in private. To the northwest rises Mount Atago, where another hermit had his false vision (no. [121](#)); to the north stretches a range where a man met a mountain god in the form of a white dog (no. [129](#)); and to the northeast towers Mount Hiei, where all sorts of curious things went on (nos. [33](#), [34](#), and others).

About thirty miles south of Kyoto is Nara, which became Japan’s first “permanent” capital in 710. (Before then the imperial residence had moved every time an emperor died.) Nara appears often in these tales because the eighth century was such a crucial period in the development of Japanese civilization, and because the religious institutions founded there remained important later on. Tōdaiji, no doubt the single most famous Buddhist temple in Japan and a must for every tourist, appears in nos. [23](#), [24](#), and [25](#); while the great Shinto shrine of Kasuga (nos. [31](#), [45](#)) still preserves the music and dance tradition honored by hell itself in no. [46](#).

The rest of Japan consisted of sixty-six provinces, whose names and boundaries were different from those of the modern Japanese prefectures. Those mentioned most often are the ones closest to the Capital, like Ōmi around the southern end of Lake Biwa; Yamato, where Nara is located; and Harima, which included the site of modern Kobe. For a courtier, the ends of the earth were represented by the nine provinces of Kyushu, such as Hizen, where Nagasaki eventually grew up; and Mutsu and Dewa in the far north of Honshu. Of the stories that take place in these more remote regions, many involve visitors from the Capital or persons bound for the Capital.

EMPERORS, MINISTERS, OFFICIALS, SERVANTS

The great nobles of this court-centered world, men whose birth destined them for the top ranks and posts in the government, figure prominently in the tales. Naturally the emperor had a special aura, even for the members of the nobility; but it is touching to glimpse (nos. [32](#), [67](#)) how impressive even a provincial governor could look in his own province.

Provincial governors were appointed and sent out from the Capital, although sometimes (no. [8](#)) they stayed in the Capital and had their provinces run by subordinates on location. Dazzling in the hinterland, at court they impressed no one because they came too low in the official hierarchy. A special provincial post, however, was that of viceroy of Kyushu. The viceroy was normally of considerable rank, but no one coveted his office since Kyushu was so far away. In fact, appointment as viceroy of Kyushu could amount to exile. Fujiwara no Yamakage (no. [105](#)) seems not to have minded too much, but Sugawara no Michizane's appointment as viceroy of Kyushu meant his downfall and led to his becoming a vengeful god (nos. [101](#), [103](#)).

The emperor was of course supposed to rule Japan, and these stories assume that he really did. But it is remarkable how often, in Japanese history, real power has been held not by the figure with the great title, but by someone who is officially his subordinate. The great shogun who unified Japan in 1600 after a century of war legitimized his power with the fiction that he was ruling for the emperor at the emperor's request. History provides many other such examples. No doubt it is natural that effective power should have passed from office to office, from clan to clan, and even from class to class over time. What is more surprising is that the emperor should never have been deposed, and should always have remained the ultimate source of legitimate political authority.

In the time of these stories, real power had been captured by the Fujiwara clan, headed by a regent whose position was hereditary in one Fujiwara line. The Fujiwara were wealthier than the imperial family, and their "private" house administration rivaled the "public" (imperial) government nominally headed by the emperor, especially since so many of the top posts in the "public" government were inevitably held by the top Fujiwaras. Since most

of the great lords belonged to the Fujiwara clan, this book is full of Fujiwaras great and small. Tadazane has already been mentioned, but the ultimate Fujiwara potentate was the Regent Michinaga (966–1027), whose little dog saves him from hostile magic in no. [63](#). Of the rest, most bore the surname Minamoto. Tōru (nos. [190](#), [191](#)) was an illustrious Minamoto.

The regent's standing illustrates this state of affairs perfectly, for although there was no slot at all for a regent in the government's official table of organization, he outranked every other official at court even if he held no other office. Normally his daughter was the emperor's wife (no. [125](#)), and therefore the mother of the next emperor. (No woman was allowed to succeed to the throne between 770 and 1630.) Michinaga had three emperors as his sons-in-law and four as his grandsons.

Under these circumstances emperors were often children, or at least very young, and usually abdicated early. A retired emperor enjoyed a good deal more freedom than a reigning one. Retired Emperor Kazan (no. [39](#)), forced to abdicate by the Fujiwara, ended up leading a life of Buddhist practice. As a reigning emperor he could never have left Kyoto on pilgrimage to see a holy man, as he does in the story. Retired emperors could even wield real influence. In the twelfth century they came to compete with the regents for power at court, leaving the reigning emperor, as usual, to play a largely ceremonial role.

The highest formal post in the government was that of chancellor, the senior minister of state. Anyone weeping with joy to see an ox eat a handful of grass would be bound to raise a smile, but he is particularly amusing when he is a chancellor (no. [197](#)). Below the chancellor came the Minister of the Left, then the Minister of the Right. Minamoto no Makoto, visited by angels in no. [44](#), was a Minister of the Left; while the "Sage Minister" of the Right, Fujiwara no Sanesuke, appears in no. [53](#) and elsewhere.

In theory the chancellor was to be a man of outstanding character who could serve as an example for the emperor and the officials. The office was not supposed to be filled unless a suitably superior candidate was available. In fact the chancellor's appointment depended largely on his standing in the Fujiwara clan. In any case, since the office carried little real power, eligible candidates often declined the honor — one reason why the post

was often vacant. The Minister of the Left had far more genuine authority since he was the legal head of the government, and responsible for the working of the Council of State (no. [11](#)). The Minister of the Right could substitute for him as needed, and did so as a matter of course when the Minister of the Left served concurrently as regent.

Below the ministers were three grades of counselors. (Major Counselor Yasumichi and his fox-infested mansion appear in no. [80](#).) The two top grades belonged, like the ministers, to the Council of State. Among the many other, lower offices were those of controller (no. [11](#)) and chamberlain. The controllers (there were between six and nine of them) supervised essential administrative activities which linked the Council of State with the central and provincial bureaucracies. Chamberlains were generally younger and of much lower rank than the officials just described, but their office was unusually glamorous because at least some of them, being private secretaries to the emperor, had frequent access to him. One chamberlain is the victim of a naughty joke in no. [7](#), and another has a strange dream in no. [56](#).

Several stories concern members of the Palace Guards and the Imperial Police. Both were needed. Security in the Capital was doubtful, especially at night, even without the parades of demons that people occasionally met in the dark, deserted streets (see below). Robberies were not uncommon, and passersby could be murdered under the very walls of the palace compound. It is probably only since the seventeenth century that Kyoto has been as safe as it and other Japanese cities are now.

The Palace Guards consisted of Gate Guards, Military Guards, and Inner Guards, each divided into Left and Right contingents. All six contingents besiege a mansion in no. [8](#), but only the Inner Guards come to grief. Since the Inner Guards served physically closer to the emperor and were therefore grander than the others, their undoing in no. [8](#) is all the funnier. The leading officers of the guards were captains of various grades, like the gallant young man of no. [78](#). In fact the post of senior captain of the Inner Guards (either contingent would do, but Left was preferable since it meant higher prestige) was one of the most desirable of all for a very high-born young man (no. [168](#)).

The Imperial Police had their headquarters just outside the

palace compound. Their chief (no. [102](#)) was normally a counselor and had direct access to the emperor. They could be brave (no. [79](#)) and they could be rough. For their dirty work they routinely used freed convicts like the ones in no. [173](#) who force a poor young man to carry a strangely heavy corpse.

Below all these came the humble people who made up the bulk of the Capital's population. When they appear in these stories they are nameless. The men seem usually to be *saburai*, or capable of being *saburai* if only they could find a job. The heroes of nos. [74](#) and [174](#) are that sort of person. The word meant "servant," someone who served a nobleman in any one of many capacities. It comes from the same verb as the familiar *samurai*, or "warrior," but in those days its meaning was less specialized. The assumption that a young man of humble station was or should be a *saburai* illustrates the overwhelming importance of the aristocracy in the life of the Capital.

HOUSES

Emperor or commoner, people lived in single-story houses where they sat and slept on the floor, as many Japanese still do. "Bed" in this book refers only to a sleeping-place, not to a piece of furniture or to any other structure. Covers were often just a layer of robes. *Tatami*, the thick straw flooring for which "traditional" Japanese houses are now famous, had not yet been invented. Floors were polished boards spread with straw mats. Having no permanent outside wall, rooms had no windows and generally no outside door. Interior doors were sliding panels.

The boundary between outside and inside was a sort of continuous shelf a few feet wide which ran all around the house. "Veranda" is the word for it in these stories, although it was not really a veranda at all. The outside rooms opened onto this shelf. A gentleman might sit on the veranda to talk with a lady inside, the two often being separated by a hanging blind. In one episode (no. [213](#)), a holy monk steps straight out of the empress's room onto the veranda and does something quite disgusting.

The rooms along the veranda could be closed off by latticework shutters, which were backed by boards and divided horizontally

into upper and lower panels. When both panels were in place the room was supposed to be secure from sun, wind, rain, and prying eyes. However, the upper panel could swing up and outward, horizontally, leaving the room open. In no. [44](#) a gentleman finds three little angels dancing on an open shutter panel.

The elaborate mansions of the great lords were composed of separate pavilions (sometimes referred to as “wings”) linked by covered, open-sided galleries. There was a large garden around them, and a pond in front with an island in it. No. [139](#) gives an idealized description of such a garden. The mansion faced south. On its east and west sides it had an entrance, and just inside each entrance a “middle gate” which gave access to the corresponding “wing” of the mansion proper. In no. [71](#) a devoted monk sits by a middle gate of the chancellor’s mansion to pray for the chancellor’s recovery.

MEN, WOMEN, AND MANNERS

You would not guess from these stories that a court lady of Michinaga’s time wrote one of the world’s greatest novels, though the Jijū of no. [57](#) does seem capable of practically any stroke of genius. Women played a major role in cultural life, but their presence here is subdued. In fact, the book contains not a single woman’s name. “Jijū” and the other seeming names are actually nicknames. Women did not use their personal names in public. Two woman writers of the age are known only as “Michitsuna’s mother” and “Takasue’s daughter.” “Mitsutō’s sister” is another example. Although no. [68](#) is really about her, not her brother, the story names and describes her brother before ever mentioning her, and never names her at all.

Proper women stayed hidden, physically as well as figuratively, though peasant women must have been too active to imitate them. Not that women never went outside. But among the aristocracy, a gentleman seldom saw a lady’s face plainly in broad daylight. There was usually a curtain between them, and even when they were in bed together it was dark or at best dim.

This is obvious in no. [177](#). When the young monk, newly arrived in the lady’s house, hears rustling in a room nearby, he knows right

away what is going on: curtains on a portable frame are being moved in so that the lady can talk to him from behind them. He will not actually see her. This movable, curtained enclosure, forming a tiny room inside a room, plays a role in several stories (nos. [58](#), [73](#), [125](#)).

The monk does not see the lady until he takes a walk outside and spots a hole in one of the shutters that enclose her room for the night. (The literature of the time is full of men peering through such cracks and holes.) Naturally he falls in love. Later on, when she allows him into her room knowing that he will be joining her in bed, she still has a cushion laid for him *outside* her curtains. The only light in the room is from a dim lamp behind a screen. No doubt the lamp is out and her maids all asleep when he finally lies down beside her. She never sits simply talking with him face to face.

Courting men were like bees visiting shy flowers, and courtship took place largely in the dark. Heichū (no. [57](#)) has never seen the lady he is so desperate to make love to, and when he finally gets into her room it is naturally pitch dark. He can only assume that the woman lying there is the one he is courting; in fact, he must check whether she is a woman at all by feeling over her face and her long, cool hair.

Both men and women seem to have wept freely and often in response to emotion. Courtship always involved tears. When you wept you dried your eyes with your sleeves, and if your grief was deep enough your sleeves got pretty wet. A man with conspicuously dry sleeves might appear insincere. Heichū (no. [56](#)) knew this so well that he took a little bottle of water with him when he went courting, to dampen himself as needed.

The transition from lover to husband was a passage from darkness and secrecy to daylight and public recognition. No. [220](#) summarizes this process. The bridegroom spends two nights with the bride, leaving while it is still dark. On the third night he stays in bed with her on into the morning, for her parents and household, and in fact for her, to see. Was there nothing else to getting married in those days? Of course there was, but this, together with some discreet rituals, was the gist of the “wedding.” Moreover, aristocratic husbands, who might have lesser wives and concubines as well as a principal wife, did not normally live with

their wives but only visited them. The wife in no. [54](#) lives with her parents in a great lord's mansion, and her husband just spends the night with her. The emperor did not live with his principal consort either (no. [125](#)). In this sense, more modest people lived what seem more normal lives. The husband and wife of no. [130](#) obviously live together; and the husband of no. [134](#) is afraid of his wife in a manner recognizable the world over.

Only women used the portable curtains just described, but in formal circumstances high-ranking men too might speak from behind blinds. The governor in no. [8](#) does just this when he finally admits his victims to his mansion. The emperor normally spoke or watched from behind blinds. Being made of thin bamboo or rush strips, blinds were more or less transparent to someone in a dim space looking out at a bright scene. Often rooms were screened from the outside only by blinds, like the residence of the Dragon King in no. [183](#).

The tendency to avoid face-to-face contact also encouraged conversations conducted not directly but through servants. It was beneath a lord or lady's dignity to speak directly to a humble person, even through a curtain or blind, and a servant would carry messages back and forth instead. Approximate equals would likewise become acquainted through letters and messages carried by intermediaries. This was possible because people had so many servants.

It is difficult for us now to imagine a life so peopled by servants of all degrees. In no. [133](#) a man goes back to see the wife he left many years ago. It saddens him to find the house falling to ruin, but his wife's plight and the force of his own cruelty only sink in when he discovers that she has been too poor to keep a single servant. Even the starving young man of no. [172](#) has a servant to open the door for him. The poor woman in no. [175](#), abandoned by her husband, is reduced to living "a sad life in her poor, dreary house, alone but for a pair of maids." Better-off people had servants and "retainers" of all sorts.

As a result, a man's "household" was much larger than what we would call his "family," and whatever happened to him affected this larger group. The fox-girl of no. [82](#) takes the randy hero home to a beautiful house bustling with servants who welcome her effusively. In fact, to evoke a fine, prosperous residence, it was not

enough to praise the size or luxury of the building. The place had also to be “bustling,” which meant that it had lots of servants and visitors. If it was not “bustling,” it looked forlorn and gave the impression that the occupant, whatever his or her means, had little real standing in the world.

With so many servants, people were seldom, if ever, alone in our sense of the word. A lady like the one in no. [177](#) may have slept within her curtains, but several maids slept in the same room. Someone was always within earshot, if not within sight. The writers of the time did not insist on this since it was obvious to them and their readers, and since in any case servants did not really “count” in relation to their masters; but we need to be reminded. No one of the slightest standing went anywhere entirely alone. Even the wanderer of no. [127](#) has a servant with him on his travels, and so does the threadbare monk of no. [155](#).

MAGIC, HEALING, AND RELIGION

One thing that makes these tales unlike recently collected Japanese folktales, despite the continuity of many motifs, is religion. Medieval Japan was as steeped in religion as medieval Europe, and people thought in religious terms far more often than nowadays. Buddhism was dominant, but other religious or magical traditions were important too. None were mutually exclusive, at least not in any sense that might sound serious to a Christian or a Moslem.

The magic and religion in these stories fall into four main categories: yin-yang lore, Chinese yoga, the cults of the native Japanese gods, and Buddhism. The first two can be dealt with fairly quickly. The native gods, however, will require fuller treatment, together with such preoccupations as spirit possession, dreams, healing, and the fear of pollution. I will save Buddhism till last, even though I will have to refer to it often before then, just because Buddhism looms so large. Magic, spirit powers, healing, etc. are, after all, subjects familiar to us in a general way from many cultures; and so is the quest for right conduct and salvation which finds its expression in Buddhism as in other religions. But Buddhist ideas, the names and roles of Buddhist divinities, and the other trappings of the Buddhist faith are too complex to treat

consecutively until the other, lesser topics are safely out of the way.

YIN-YANG LORE

The yin-yang tradition came to Japan from China. In the West, most people know now that “yin” means the dark, moist, cold, passive, female principle of the universe, while “yang” means the bright, dry, hot, active, male principle. This is not wrong, of course, but it represents such a high level of philosophical abstraction that it has little to do with yin-yang lore as it figures in these stories. Yin-yang knowledge, intricate and practical, involved astrology, geomancy, purification, divination, and offensive or defensive magic.

I have called the yin-yang masters in this book “diviners” because they appear most commonly in that role. They were often called in to fathom the meaning of puzzling events and to prescribe appropriate action (nos. [63](#), [164](#)). They could also be asked to determine auspicious or inauspicious days and to interpret dreams. Purification rites come up in nos. [162](#) and [179](#). Both the government and private patrons considered such functions essential. The government’s table of organization included a Bureau of Divination, which employed the top members of the profession like Abe no Seimei (nos. [59](#), [60](#), and others) and Kamo no Tadayuki (nos. [162](#), [165](#)). Although hereditary in certain families, the profession required long training. As already noted, such men also played a key role in the establishment of the official calendar.

Yin-yang diviners practiced magic at the request of their patrons. In no. [59](#), for example, Seimei defends a young gentleman against a hired diviner’s curse. Such magic was lethal (no. [163](#)). A common countermeasure against curses and other misfortunes, foreseen by the diviner thanks to his art, was seclusion. The potential victim had to shut himself up strictly at home, admitting no one and talking to no outsider. No. [14](#) describes the particularly horrid way a demon broke through a man’s seclusion, sensibly ordered by a diviner.

CHINESE YOGA

The Chinese tradition of ascetic self-cultivation entered Japan early, but was then overwhelmed by Buddhism. It is represented here by a few old stories. The ascetic's goal was the eternal one of freedom from mortality and from the constraints of the body. A truly accomplished ascetic could shed his gross physicality and take on a new, spiritual body as an Immortal; and one nice thing about being an Immortal was that you could fly. One ascetic who thought he could fly made a big mistake (no. [90](#)), but the wizard of no. [88](#) managed beautifully. (This wizard is known to have mastered Chinese yoga, but it is true that he mixed Buddhist esoteric practices with it.)

In time the idea of the Immortal came, under Buddhist influence, to be associated with certain ascetic monks who were devoted to the Lotus Sutra (see below).

THE NATIVE GODS

Japan has always been full of gods. There are now shrines to them even on the roofs of department stores. In medieval times people often thought of Japan as the “land of the gods,” thus expressing a natural love for the beautiful Japanese islands and their human community.

In the centuries covered by these stories there were countless cults to these gods, and some were very strong. On the whole, though, the worship of the native Japanese gods did not constitute a clear-cut religion. We are often told that the two main religions of Japan are Buddhism and Shinto, and that Shinto (“the Way of the Gods”) is the “native religion of Japan.” But Shinto has only existed as a self-conscious religion since the late nineteenth century, when it developed in response to a movement of political and religious ideas which is foreign to the world of these tales. The earlier cults of local, regional, or even national significance celebrated a great variety of divine presences in symbiosis with Buddhism.

Philosophically and organizationally, Buddhism was far more highly developed. A handful of important shrines tried with limited success to keep Buddhism at arm's length, but most were as much dominated by their associated Buddhist temples as the emperor

was by the Fujiwara regent. Not that this domination involved force. Many legends tell how the native gods accepted Buddhism gladly, listened eagerly to its teaching, and sometimes even claimed Buddhist-sounding titles.

All this helps to explain why the stories talk more about Buddhist divinities than about the native gods. Although the court honored the gods, it was so steeped in Buddhism that it did not think deeply about them. The Kasuga God, the clan god of the Fujiwara, upheld Buddhism with affecting conviction (no. [31](#)). In fact, his shrine was thoroughly dominated by Kōfukuji (no. [45](#) and others), the oldest ancestral temple of the same Fujiwara clan. The God of Fire and Thunder (no. [101](#)) is very different, but he still insists that Buddhism moves him deeply and has so far deterred him from destroying Japan completely.

The Kasuga God and the God of Fire and Thunder were major divinities. So was the divine presence at Kumano, a great pilgrimage center whose name alone appears in these stories. Others were more remote. No. [30](#) shows how gentlemanly a provincial god could be, but the mountain gods Kōya and Nifu, eager to help found a great Buddhist temple, are impressively rugged (no. [26](#)). The war between the mountain god and the wizard (no. [88](#)) is one of Japan's most famous legends. Nos. [77](#) and [188](#), with their legends of human sacrifices offered to monkey gods, conjure up a world that must have seemed almost as strange to the original readers of these stories as it does to us.

Some gods had animal forms. In addition to monkeys, these stories include a dog (no. [29](#)) and a snake and centipede (no. [187](#)). Animals could also be divine messengers: the deer for the Kasuga God; the monkey for the Hie God (no. [41](#)). The fox is associated with Inari, a god of plenty, and that is probably how the fox gets into the rite that starts no. [47](#). Later in the same story, the fox itself is a god. (Fox spirits, who occupy a lower level than gods, are discussed below.)

Humblest of all, perhaps, were the road gods (nos. [159](#), [178](#)). Their direct descendants can still be seen along the roads in some parts of Japan. Now as then, most road gods “have a man part and a woman part,” as no. [159](#) puts it. The road god in both stories appears as an old man, the single most likely form for a native god to take when appearing to a human.

All the gods thrived on human attention and in fact required it. Naturally they received offerings of food and drink, as well as rites and festival observances. But in these stories the gods especially enjoy music and dance. The divine applause described in no. [48](#) was one accepted sign of a god's pleasure. The God of Good Fortune's lust for music (no. [47](#)) seems demented; but the Kasuga God nicely disposes of the idea that music has nothing, or nothing important, to do with genuine religion (no. [45](#)).

COMMUNICATING WITH THE GODS

Not only did human beings address the gods, but the gods spoke to humans. Shamanistic possession is now banished from the religion that identifies itself as Shinto, but in the world of these stories it was quite normal. So was a keen interest in divinely inspired dreams.

A god might deliver an oracle through a human medium. Hitokotonushi, the name of the god who opposes the wizard in no. [88](#), means "Master of the Single Word" and suggests the practice of giving one-word oracles, yes or no. In the story, though, Hitokotonushi accuses the wizard at length through one of the emperor's own attendants. This sort of spontaneous possession of a household member by a god occurs in no. [31](#), and also in no. [163](#) where a man discovers, thanks to "an oracle delivered in his own home," that an enemy is plotting to kill him. However, there were plenty of professional mediums, too. Some worked in healing, as explained below under that topic. Others belonged to the staffs of major shrines like those of Kasuga or Hie. In no. [41](#) a Hie Shrine medium is seen delivering oracles to a crowd of pilgrims.

Shrine mediums were women, as were most other professional or spontaneous mediums. Young boys sometimes gave oracles, though none do in this book. Of shamanic men, most seem to have been monks like the one who has the great vision in no. [101](#), or like the monk described in no. [88](#) as "the vessel of the God of Hakusan." Many monks were involved with spirit possession as healers, often acting in partnership with a woman medium.

An absorbing or outstandingly apt oracle was uncommon. What people sought instead, at both shrines and Buddhist temples, was

dreams. The Buddhist divinities did not possess mediums, but they and the gods could speak or otherwise signify their will in dreams.

The common procedure was to do a seven-day retreat at a temple or shrine, in the hope of getting a sign from the divinity in the form of a dream. If none came, you could do a second seven-day period or even a third. The dream seems always to come just before the last dawn of the retreat (no. [45](#)). In no. [174](#), a young man prays at a temple for relief from poverty, and by acting on his dream message he becomes rich.

A medieval Japanese story may not identify a communication from a god or a Buddhist divinity as a dream, but may describe it instead as though it were a normal, waking event. (In most such instances the circumstances still make it clear that the communication is a dream, and sometimes another version of the story may say so plainly.) This suggests that dream experience and waking experience were not always sharply distinguished from each other, and that dream experience could be accepted as perfectly authentic. Some sacred dreams, although unsought, carried great weight. In a fascinating example (no. [197](#)), a monk dreams that a certain temple has a black ox and that this ox is actually a buddha. The dream starts a mass pilgrimage (it really happened) to worship the Buddha-Ox.

Besides sacred dreams, these tales contain other kinds of dreams which show how fascinating people found the theme. Examples are the complementary dreams dreamed simultaneously by both members of a couple (nos. [130](#), [134](#)), and the extraordinary Buddhist morality dream of no. [198](#).

HEALING

The literature of the time rarely acknowledges that the Japanese had acquired from China (as well as undoubtedly developed also on their own) knowledge of medicine and drugs. The physician who appears briefly in no. [125](#) must have known about such things, but his treatment is not even mentioned. Instead, the emphasis is on spiritual rather than physical processes, and especially on exorcism.

Several stories contain a passage like this one (no. [72](#)): “Then