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Contents

Articles
An Essay on a Method and the History of Research into Nichiren
.................................................. Keijin MAMIYA 1
Shikoku Pilgrimage and Belief in Kobo Daishi
.................................................. The Case of the Eminent Priest, Bukkai
.................................................. Shōzen ASAI 25
Gli esordi degli studi di storia delle religioni di Pettazzoni :
concezione di base e “La religione primitiva in Sardegna”
.................................................. Junichi EGAWA (75)
An Ambiguous Common Faith of John Dewey
.................................................. Ippei SHOJĪ (57)
Meditation based on the Mind Only Theory found in Paṇcakārābhīṣaṃbodhi
.................................................. As described in Rahahprodīpa of Ratnakarāśānti
.................................................. Hiroki MATSUMORI (41)

Transcendental Political Action
A Case of Oshirasama Tatari from the Tohoku Region
.................................................. Dale K. ANDREWS (21)

Notes and News
Perspective to the study of space in Buddhism
.................................................. Masahide MORI (55)

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Transcendental Political Action

—— A Case of Oshirasama Tatari from the Tohoku Region ——

Dale K. Andrews

1. Introduction

As Yoshida Teigo demonstrates through his studies of spirit possession, Japanese villages are not the harmonious communities that they are often, wishfully, envisioned to be. Similarly, I too embarked upon fieldwork in one agricultural village in the Tohoku region with an earnest desire to experience the Japanese furusato (故里), that idealized, rural hometown. Within time however, it was made clear that the villagers negotiated daily a complexity of social relationships, wherein conflict naturally occurred.

It is the premise of this paper to delve further into the problem of conflict by offering an example of tatari (祟り). This supernatural based concept may be understood to correspond with the terms curse or retribution in English. This is a phenomenon that is generally characterized by a belief in which deities, spirits of the dead and the like will attempt to force redress upon humans for violations or insufficiencies in worship, by means of causing death, illness, injury, or other social misfortunes and calamities.

Herein, a contemporary case of oshirasama (オシラ様) tatari will be presented with the hope of promoting a greater understanding of the dynamics of conflict within the village community. And by detailing such conflict, I aim to distinguish various political


2 Northern Honshu.
actions manifesting in the public domain. Further, in the course of this paper an attempt will be made to begin a discourse into the effects of supernatural agency upon political action.

2. The Background of Oshirasama Belief in the Village

Through extended research in my subject village, it has become evident that among the residents of the community there exists an adherence to a belief system that actively incorporates conceptions of tatari. The extensive variety of tatari in all its shapes and forms will not be addressed here; the discussion will be limited to the tatari associated with one particular pair of oshirasama (two wooden figures symbolizing pair deities, a woman and her horse husband). The degree to which the subject of tatari pervades into the consciousness of the villagers can be ascertained by examining the published works on village history and folklore. Local historians, under the administration of the village’s board of education, compiled numerous stories relating occurrences of tatari and those referencing the oshirasama are noteworthy. In light of this cultural historical background, it may be premised that village people have developed an awareness of and formulated attitudes toward the oshirasama as being vehicles of tatari.

As far back as 1930, one regional newspaper published an article detailing the high distribution of oshirasama throughout this subject village. To this day, seemingly many of those houses (家屋合) continue to enshrine the oshirasama as protectorate deities. Significantly, in many instances these houses are main houses (本家). This tendency reflects the role that main houses have traditionally played in the religious life of the community. Having the economic means to support ritual events, the main houses often were at the center of religious activities within the village. As Ishizu Teriju has earlier pointed out, though the worship of oshirasama may be performed by specialized religious congregations (講) or even by individuals, it is commonly observed that oshirasama are worshiped in the homes of main houses where branch houses (分家) gather to participate in communal worship. But due to the lessening reliance on kinship ties and the continued weakening of communal relations within the village, the belief in the oshirasama has been observably affected. Undoubtedly not just a preventative action of the current age, houses will on occasion relinquish their oshirasama, depositing them in local temples and shrines, often with the straightforward intention of avoiding retribution from the deity for neglect or improper worship.

It should be noted that among the multitude of deities that are identified as being worshiped by the villagers, the oshirasama maintain a familiarity which seems to exceed that of other deities. That is, notwithstanding that on the god shelf (神棚) of an ordinary village home it is not unusual to have multiple objects of worship (神具) and amulets (朱印札) representing various deities, these are generally left unhandled. In contrast, during the annual ritual period of the Little New Year (小正月), the oshirasama becomes animated through the manipulation of the shaman-like blind mediums of northern Japan, the itako (イタコ). This ritual known as oshira asobase (オシラ遊ばせ) holds great importance to the villagers, for it allows them through the agency of the itako, to receive from the oshirasama predictions for the coming year. This divination of both fortune and misfortune alike is provided for each household (家) (a representative member attending, making offerings of rice, rice wine, and money). Afterwards, while reciting prayers the itako will bless the

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4 For a discussion on the present situation regarding kinship relations and present day attitudes towards the main and branch house relationship in the subject village, reference the writer’s “Death and the Social Relations of the Japanese Household” Tohoku Bunka Kenkyushitsu Kiyo 46 (2005), 61–74.
assembled believers, often predominately women, physically using the oshirasama tapping the heads, shoulders, and backs of the believers in a purifying ritual. It is this tangible, direct access with the oshirasama and its prophetic powers that conceivably serves to instill a sense of intimacy, while at the same time stimulating awareness toward human vulnerability in the world at large, as when misfortune is foretold.6

Witnessing how worshipers attend to the oshirasama, it is possible to surmise that the oshirasama are generally considered as being benevolent deities, exacting no excessive amount of worship in return for their protection and prophecy. The deities are ritually animated but one day a year, with offerings to the deities then given to the itako in payment for services. On the other hand, the oshirasama are additionally characterized as showing a marked tendency to deliver retribution upon those who fail to observe the rules of conduct which safeguard the oshirasama’s divine status.

3. Emerging Conflict within the Village

In this village there exists a municipally operated museum of local history and folklore, administered by the board of education. In recent years this museum has become a stage for intense political infighting. Behind this community conflict endures two opposing identities derived from the former villages of Kannonsawa and Takamatsu,7 which amalgamated into the present day village almost 50 years ago. Even now the villagers proudly distinguish themselves from one another according to identities inherited from these “old village” (kyūson旧村) demarcations.8 Moreover this is a perceptibly “indivisible component” in how they view themselves and each other in the present day.9 Such “old village” identities run deep and are readily manipulated in the arena of local politics, the reality of which became conspicuously evident when the curator of the museum was forced into retirement in March 2002.

Far exceeding Japan’s established retirement age, finally at the age of 70 the village administration succeeded in having the curator resign. This, it is said, was no easy task, because the curator helped establish the museum some 25 years before using his personal collection of historical materials. With limited interference from the village office, he managed the museum to which his name became synonymous. It is explained that after passing retirement age at 60, every year when the question of extending his annual contract began to be discussed, he would always threaten to hollow out the museum by taking his collection with him into retirement, unless he was retained. He repeatedly argued that the mayor who constructed the museum, now deceased, had promised that the curator could be employed for life. Still, no one could confirm or deny this oral agreement.10 Finally however, the present mayor along with the superintendent of schools, who is the younger brother of the former mayor who built the museum, compelled the curator to go into retirement. In exchange for accepting retirement and donating his collection, the curator would receive the title and position of “honorary curator.” This was a position that the curator ostensibly believed would nonetheless let him control the museum.

The mayor and the superintendent of schools represented not only the village office per se, but also Kannonsawa. They sought to take advantage of the curator’s retirement to wrest control of the museum away from those in Takamatsu. In spite that the museum was funded by the village, by merit of its location in the heart of the Takamatsu district, and with all its employees being from Takamatsu, it was run as if it was the sole property of Takamatsu.

6 Whereas Byron Earhart discusses the lesser power of deities represented in amulets, in contrast it may be premised that the oshirasama in the home retains all its sacrality and corresponding risk. Ibid. 618.
7 The village names have been altered to provide anonymity.
8 For more on this division see the author’s article, “Mushrooms of Political Redemption—A Look at Rural Politics in Northern Japan” Bunke 68: 1—2 (2004). Henceforth MPR.
10 Tadashi Hanami explains the vagueness of Japanese contracts in “Conflict and Its Resolution in Industrial Relations and Labor Law,” Conflict in Japan, 114.
Handpicking a replacement to fill the curator’s position, the mayor’s side made their move to bring the museum back into the fold of village control. The replacement was a young university graduate hailing from outside the village.11 Thus as an “outsider” the replacement posed a very real threat to the curator’s expected authority.12 From the onset, the curator demonstrated animosity towards the unfolding events. In protest, he quickly discarded his position as “honorary curator.”

What ensued was an organized campaign by the curator to discredit13 the replacement and have him removed from the museum, and in an extended sense, from the village itself. To effectuate this action he enlisted Takamatsu residents, and believing in their legitimacy they attempted to consolidate support by playing upon the now traditional image of Takamatsu being assailed under Kannonsawa’s political maneuverings. Kannonsawa was represented overtly by the young mayor and superintendent of schools,14 both of whom were linked through political affiliation as

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11 A strong tendency is exhibited in the village’s hiring practices in which “villagers” are given priority in employment. In this case, the term “villager” primarily denotes someone who belongs to a house of the village. Although, it is not a necessity to have been born into the family, as in the case of those individuals marrying into a family, it can be seen that there is also an inclination by those born and raised in the village to view themselves as being truer villagers than those who marry into the village, whether male or female. Still, this thinking is also greatly influenced by the social, economical, and political status associated with any particular household.

12 As Teigo Yoshida points out, regarding outsiders, “How they fit in is not determined. Therefore...they are considered potentially dangerous.” In “The Stranger as God : The Place of the Outsider in Japanese Folk Religion” Ethnology 20 (1981), 95.


14 Monica Duffy Toft explains that “Legitimacy refers to perceived justness of cause; because it determines the effectiveness of mobilizing capability, legitimacy directly influences a group’s decision to seek sovereignty.” The Geography of Ethnic Violence : Identity, Interests, and The Indivisibility of Territory, 23.

15 The significance of the curator and the core of his supporters being septuagenarians cannot be overstated. It is necessary to understand that the clash over the museum was also a

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17 The Geography of Ethnic Violence : Identity, Interests, and The Indivisibility of Territory, 28.

18 MPR, 124.
4. The Curator’s Psychology of Belief

The curator is generally recognized by other villagers as being an expressly religious man. That is, he believes in and places importance on supernatural occurrences, and because of this he has been both praised and ridiculed. From the view of other villagers, he is comparatively odd in that he collects among other things, the religious articles which they routinely discard. Generally such behavior is considered eccentric, but as he was employed in the village museum, a certain amount of latitude was allowed against his peculiar activities.

His formulated beliefs clearly have been affected by his life experience. That both his parents died when he was yet a child, has, as he frequently explains, had a tremendous impact upon the sense of obligation that he feels towards their dead spirits. Consequently, his parents became the focal object of worship in his home. So unlike most villagers who maintain both a god shelf and a Buddhist altar (butsudan 仏壇) in the home, he has only a simple shelf on which the memorial tablets (jihai 供牌) of his parents and ancestors are placed. Correspondingly, he is also well-known for making large donations to the Buddhist temple of which he is a parishioner (danka 檀家) and accordingly maintains an amiable relationship with the Buddhist priest. His donations are one added way by which he demonstrates his devotion to the memory of his parents.

Despite that he does not pray to the gods (kami 神) in his home, he routinely and devoutly sweeps the ground of the local Shinto shrine, which he explains is in repayment to the gods for delivering him from certain death due to lung cancer. Left with only one lung, his “miraculous” survival is said by villagers to further attest to not only the benevolence of the local deities, but also his strength of belief. As one villager declared, “Because he had his faith, he didn’t die and was saved.”

What is offered here is only a slight insight into the curator’s personal beliefs; however, two points should be observed. First, he is considered to be a devout believer in the supernatural, and this routinely affects his interaction with other villagers. Second, despite many villagers having admiration for the strength of his beliefs, the curator’s overall thinking is seen as differing from the village norm in certain respects. For example, his collecting of discarded religious articles, including items from graves or other’s memorial tablets, is generally considered taboo.

Returning to the subject of his parents, the curator frequently related that due to their loss at such a young age, he developed his penchant for nostalgic things, which serves to draw him back to those precious few years when his parents were alive. It is hoped that this will offer insight into not only why he started the museum, but also why it is equally difficult for him to part from it.

5. The Outset of Oshirasama Tatari

Roughly fifteen years ago, a realtor living in Takamatsu, who became aware of a disowned pair of oshirasama, escorted the curator to an abandoned house with the intention of retrieving them. Upon entering the house, the realtor motioned toward the box that held the oshirasama, kicking it with his foot, while allegedly speaking of the oshirasama in a contemptuous manner. It is asserted that sensing the impropriety of the realtor’s action, the curator gently cradled the box in his arms and removed it from the house.

That night, the realtor was stricken with a pain in the same leg by which he had kicked the oshirasama’s box. The pains persisted and in due time left the realtor unable to walk. Ultimately, the realtor was diagnosed with diabetes, had his leg amputated and sometime thereafter died. Following this series of events, his family abandoned their

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19 The house is said to have bankrupted and the family subsequently moved from the village. During the course of research, the writer has encountered another story of a similar situation, where a family forced into bankruptcy, abandoned both their home and oshirasama. Afterwards, a branch house undertook to worship the oshirasama.

20 Likewise Kodate Chūzō noted that the oshirasama if not treated well or blasphemed will bring forth tatori. Aomori-ken no Minkan Shinshō (Kitakata Shinsha, 1986), 215.
house leaving the village.

Coinciding to this, after taking home the box containing the oshirasama, the curator was beset by nightmares. The following day, the curator, while obtaining permission from the village office to place the oshirasama in the museum, was unexpectedly confronted by a village itako. The itako, who is not thought to have had any prior knowledge of the curator's activities, discerned the curator to be in possession of the oshirasama and forthrightly informed him that his nightmares were the result of the oshirasama's tatarī at work. From that point on, the curator is said to have begun earnestly worshipping the oshirasama, and in time the dreams subsided.

The above account was narrated to the writer over the course of many conversations had with the curator and his close associates. To him as well as other villagers, this story describes a clear-cut case of oshirasama tatarī. The tatarī manifested ultimately with the death of the realtor. His irreverence was met by retribution from the oshirasama and is said to have led directly to his death. Whether the realtor's family believed in the tatarī or not is uncertain, but the family's reluctance to remain in the village suggests an attempt to avoid the social stigma derived from these events.

As this story was told to the writer during a period concurrent with the purported reoccurrence of tatarī from this same oshirasama (explained below), it also represents a concrete attempt to add credibility to the new incident of tatarī. Further, the involvement of the itako, even if only peripherally, functions to give more weight to the legitimacy of this story.21 Edward M. Bruner commented that, "Narratives are not only structures of meaning but structures of power as well."22

6. The Developing Belief in the Oshirasama

The museum over the years came to house an extensive collection of the local folk culture and history. Archeological artifacts, agricultural tools, and household items were variously on display.

The oshirasama came to be exhibited in the museum grouped along side a variety of items connected to the village's religious culture. Still, recognizing the oshirasama not just as exhibit items, but as objects of worship, the curator did his utmost to ensure that proper and timely offerings were made.

As an extension of the curator's personal worship of the oshirasama in the village museum, in April 1992 the "Playing with the Oshirasama Club" (おしら様と遊ぶ会)23 convened for an oshira asebe ritual at the museum. A regional newspaper reported the event. With a former superintendent of schools acting as the club's chairman, one village itako was called to perform a divination for the curator and about ten other assembled believers.

Thus in this way the dual recognition of the oshirasama as objects for exhibit and for worship came to be more widely promoted. This can be seen as marking a formal acknowledgement by the village office that the oshirasama were requisite of special consideration. It might be thought that the use of public facilities as a setting for religious services would cause problems as regarded the division between religion and state, but this is circumvented by the ambiguous character of the event as play.

Ten years later, this special handling of the oshirasama is still observable. On occasion, villagers will comment that the museum's exhibit items have the lingering spirits of former owners attached, even declaring that they will not enter the museum fearing that these dead spirits will try to possess them. So it is not surprising that in the spring of 2002, just prior to the curator's retirement, he requested the village office to approve a ritual action to remove the spirits attached to the exhibited religious objects.

21 Komatsu Kazuhiko writes that these narratives are for the villagers their "history." In Akureiron—Hai kara no Messei (Chikuba Shobo, Tokyo 1997), 13.
23 In this sense a special religious congregation was formed, atypical of the common pattern witnessed in this village.
This was done at the urging of his co-worker, who expressed an unwillingness to continue worshiping the various deities amassed in the museum. She feared that if they were not properly worshiped she would be subject to tatori. To this request, the village office is said to have initially shown reluctance, questioning the necessity. Notwithstanding, the local Shinto priest was hired to perform the ritual which the village office funded.

7. A Reoccurrence of Tatori

In the spring of 2004, roughly two years from the beginning of the dispute centered over the museum, the curator started suffering under the effects of tatori from the oshirasama which remained on exhibit in the museum. At odds with the village office concerning his uncertain role towards the museum, but left without conventional political options in the wake of the upheaval among his supporting backers, the attainment of the curator’s goals faced an uncertain future. 24

In the wake of the curator’s departure from the museum the oshirasama were no longer worshiped. The museum staff warned visitors not to mistakenly pray before the oshirasama for fear of the spirits returning to the wooden figures. But as his former co-worker suggestedly remarked, the oshirasama had become dependent upon the curator, and describing it from the oshirasama’s perspective, they felt as if they had been discarded. So after many years the oshirasama once again appeared in the curator’s dreams. This time as a great, fearsome horse which repeatedly galloped down upon him every night, and his health suffered directly from these traumatic manifestations. The co-worker interpreted it as the oshirasama communicating their displeasure at the lapse of worship, although no explanation was offered for the delay in this retributive action.

Because this co-worker is reported as infrequently having premonitions of people’s deaths, the curator further queried her whether she too had a dream about the oshirasama, but she responded that she had not.

As for his dreams, the curator expressed that the oshirasama were indicating that they wanted to be enshrined elsewhere, albeit he at first had no solid idea as to where. He originally considered a temple which is famous for oshirasama worship, but then found an acquaintance living outside the village who desired to have the deities.

Proceeding to get permission from the village office to remove the oshirasama, the curator subsequently argued that the Shinto priest was ineffective in removing the spirits. It is said that the curator originally recommended using his temple’s Buddhist priest, but as this would already cost the village more money, the services of the Shinto priest were employed by the village instead. 25 In the course of this latest negotiation the curator added that the source of the tatori was not limited to just the oshirasama, but that the tatori was also emanating from Buddhist memorial tablets and iron burial pots 26 placed in the museum. It was argued by the curator that these latter items being associated with the spirits of the human dead could not be adequately exorcised by anyone other than the Buddhist priest. This ostensibly accounts for the spirits still lingering in the tablets and pots. Nevertheless, how come under the Buddhist–Shinto dichotomy (spirits of the dead/gods), which the curator chose to employ, would the Shinto priest be unable to remove the spirit of the oshirasama deities? He unaffectedly countered that the Shinto priest is morally corrupt, a thought

24 Deward E. Walker, Jr. reports that “Those who perceive themselves as victims of witchcraft or sorcery attacks in these contexts are more often the loser, or those who suspect they would be losers in open competition.” In “Introduction” Witchcraft and Sorcery of the American Native Peoples, eds. Deward E. Walker, Jr. (University of Idaho Press, Moscow Idaho, 1989), 4.

25 On most all occasions where an officiating religious specialist is required by the village, the local Shinto priest is employed, for example, in ground breaking ceremonies. There is also an unofficially prescribed affinity between Shinto rituals and politics within the village. The village’s Shinto priest reminisces fondly of how the former mayor, who built the museum, recommended that he study to become a priest, advancing the notion that he could make a good living for the village needed its own Shinto priest.

26 As a former custom of this area, large iron pots were placed over the heads of the buried dead to prevent the further spread of leprosy and other diseases.
often echoed throughout the village, and therefore unable to properly execute the rituals.

At first, the village office showed hesitancy to move upon the curator’s request to remove objects from the museum. In part, out of the severity of this ongoing conflict with the village office, the curator had earlier come to be prohibited from entering the museum. The issue was further complicated by the unresolved antagonism between the curator and his replacement. Evaluating the nature of this latest development, it can be hypothesized that they felt newly obligated to the curator.

To this, it should be further detailed that the curator alleged that the tatari was aimed at those in the village office who were in direct charge of the museum, a section chief and his assistant. Both also had appeared in the curator’s dreams. The curator would take responsibility to pacify the oshirasama and protect them. Yet, in separate conversations they refuted the idea that they were objects of the tatari and asserted that the curator was the only afflicted individual.

Finally, the assistant to the section chief escorted the curator to the museum, and in a closed meeting with the replacement, it was explained that in consideration of the curator’s affliction, ascribed to the oshirasama and other spirits, that the village office urged remedial action in the form of the curator removing certain objects from the museum. So with an apology from the curator to the replacement for past wrongdoings, the process towards resolving not only the tatari, but the continued conflict was nearing settlement.

The village office responded with providing ¥10,000 for the purchase of religious offerings to be taken to the new custodians of the oshirasama. This donation can be seen as a conciliatory offering by the village office, symbolic of their willingness to allow the curator back into the museum. Still, he and his friends criticized the small amount provided by the village office, thus alluding to the continued underlying antagonisms.

Questions of impurity arose when the curator refused to use his own automobile to transport the oshirasama to their new home. Instead, he required the use of a village truck, being sure to place the oshirasama in the open back of the truck, not in the cab, to avoid contamination.

The memorial tablets were placed in the local temple, and the village office arranged for the tatari generating burial pot to be transferred to a larger museum in a neighboring city. The necessary remedial actions being completed, the curator recovered directly.

8. Discussion

An attempt to outline one recent case of tatari in a village in the Tohoku region has been undertaken above. Beginning with an explanation of the function of the oshirasama it was put forth that they serve as protectorate and prophetic agents in the community herein examined. As described, the conventional form of oshirasama worship in this subject village is based upon main and branch houses engaged jointly in communal worship; however, it can be discerned, with their enshrinement in the village museum, that individuals (the curator) and special religious congregations ("Playing with the Oshirasama Club") may undertake to worship these deities. Nonetheless, the fundamental relationship with the oshirasama and their worshipers is one in which they are revered for their protection and benevolence, but this is tempered against the idea that they are also to be feared for their retributive tendencies. For the reason that if worshipers fail to observe rules of etiquette which safeguard the oshirasama’s status, then they may expect retributive action in the form of tatari. The narrative of the realtor dying under the effects of the tatari works to press upon this point.

From the example provided in this paper, it is similarly clear that neglect of the oshirasama promotes the possibility of a response of tatari that, as Ikekami Yoshimasa

27 Interestingly enough, the tatari was not said to effect the curator’s replacement.
28 Approximately US$100.
has indicated, cannot be restrictively thought of as being negative or detrimental in nature.\textsuperscript{30} This is, as in the case of the curator, demonstratively true. The tatari which was said to be unfolding, in the end allowed him to reenter the museum after a prolonged period of prohibition, and as it turns out, he was later asked by the village office to manage the museum after the replacement resigned his position. For the curator, this was a favorable result of tatari indeed!

The associated history of tatari leading up to this present case, that is the story of the realtor and the initial recovery of the oshirasama, illustrates how narratives are used by actors to reinforce the authenticity of their arguments and the legitimacy of their objectives. The transmission of this narrative quite possibly had an impact over the course of action taken by the village office. That the village office condoned the removal of the items by the curator is significant. Of course, it should be acknowledged that whether or not the section chief and assistant feared illness, injury, or death befalling themselves, conceivably they would be held accountable by the local community if the curator suffered further.

In this particular case, tatari became the mechanism by which the curator and the village office could allow for a resolution of conflict, even if only tentatively. Albeit, the tatari did not directly act to encompass the problem of disparity in the distribution of resources based upon the “old village” identities, and this greater conflict remains largely unsettled. From the above example, tatari is seen to function in a manner that allows for the correction of social tensions, and as Robert J. Smith relates in regards to murahachibu (communal ostracism), tatari similarly may act to “preserve internal harmony” within the community.\textsuperscript{31}

The complexity of structuring logic to fit within the dynamics of a situation becomes visible when we examine, for instance, the reasoning behind why the Shinto priest’s ritual action was claimed as ineffective. Here, in a straightforward way, we see effort applied to make apparent inconsistencies adhere to a logical cohesive framework. Yet, explanations given as to why the priest cannot remove the spirits from the memorial tablets, burial pots, and the oshirasama, and finally where will the items be deposited, contrast roughly and yield towards the incongruent. These inconsistencies are par for the course, because the religious nature of the problem implies the presence of emotional sentiments which will show irreverence to coherence.

If the manner by which political action has been exercised in this conflict is to be categorized, it is perhaps appropriate to label these public manifestations of political action as explicit, implicit, and transcendental. Explicit political action, as evidenced through this research example, would be characterized by an overt public quality, such as when the residents of Takamatsu filed a petition which was subsequently presented before the village assembly. This type can moreover be said to conform to legal processes. In contrast, there is another type, equally active in this village, which tends to remain invisible to many of the citizenry, but, regardless of this lack of transparency, it remains public in its motivations and objectives. This is popularly recognized as backroom politics. In spite of being categorized separately, it is possible for the actors, motivations, objectives, and outcomes to correspond. In other words, there may be a confluence of political actions.

Outside of these two aforementioned forms lies a third completely viable method of political action which is able to transcend the explicit and implicit forms. Because it implies the supernatural, it is able to operate outside the logic framework of explicit and implicit action. In this sense, it serves as an alternative, but nonetheless efficacious form. This idea of a transcendental political action coincides with Raymond Firth’s discussion of religious belief.

What I want to emphasize here is that religious beliefs, in their immediate expression, are a mode of action. They are not merely passive fixed items of mental furniture; their emotional component alone would suggest this cannot be so. They are active weapons in the process of adjustment by the person who holds

\textsuperscript{30} Shisha no Kyūsai-shi–Kyoō to Hōdō no Shūkyōgaku (Kadokawa Sensho, Tokyo, 2003).

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid. 526.
them. What I mean by personal adjustment is the continual process of striving for order by the individual in his relations on the one hand with his physical and social universe, and on the other with his own logical system of categories of thought and his own set of impulses, desires and emotions.  

With the faltering of the implicit and explicit political actions in the curator’s attempt to gain control of the museum, the curator was left with no apparent political leverage. He nevertheless retained his own political agenda. The threat of retribution for not allowing the curator access is a form of political action. Still, we must also observe that the agency was thought to be supernatural in origin. Therefore, defying normative logical explanation, the curator’s political action is then attributed to the supernatural, the oshirasama.

As concerns transcendental political action, the village office is seen as unwilling to resist resolving a situation caused by supernatural agency. As members of the same community, they would possibly bear responsibility if the curator’s affliction worsened. In this way the nature of responsibility may alter in transcendental political action. When it becomes operative, restraints or barriers formed in the explicit and implicit political process that impede conventional modes of conflict resolution, become surpassable. This is not a certainty, but simply one more form of action by which to address problems in a conflict which have become seemingly insurmountable.

Through the transcendental political action of tatarì the conflict was reduced once again to a contention between the curator and the village office; the broader and more indeterminate rivalry of Kannonsawa versus Takamatsu was suppressed. The directed adversary further switched from the inaccessible mayor and superintendent of schools as representatives of the village office and Kannonsawa, to the more familiar and amicable section chief and his assistant. In consequence, the inimical character of the conflict lessened.

33  The section chief residing in Takamatsu actually is a neighbor to the curator.

The idea of publicness also needs to be addressed. The three forms of political action, that is, explicit, implicit, and transcendental as per this case of conflict, all fall into the public sphere. In spite of the possibility that oshirasama tatarì may occur in the sphere of the private,34 as with the rector, the reoccurrence of tatarì with the curator is public because of its underlying political objective.

Diverging from the foregoing stream of thought, readdressing the amalgamation between the two former villages of Kannonsawa and Takamatsu and the difficulties related therein, I choose to draw upon an analogy of main house and branch house relations. It could be conjectured that central to the enduring rivalry is the notion that there has been no agreement as to which “old village”, Kannonsawa or Takamatsu, is the rightful main house.35 Previous to the amalgamation, Takamatsu, being blessed with fertile agricultural land, was widely perceived as being more prosperous than Kannonsawa. Following the amalgamation, Kannonsawa’s larger population has given it political predominance over Takamatsu, the end effect being that village facilities are built predominately in Kannonsawa. Consequently, seen in terms of main house and branch house relations, it is as if, Takamatsu as the main house has been usurped by its poorer branch house, Kannonsawa. This could cause a feeling of animosity and serve to maintain “old village” identities.

This paper offers a preliminary investigation into the effects of supernatural agency upon political action. It is recognized that further effort is needed to explore this topic more fully.

34  The sphere of the private may be characterized by another contemporary case documented within the same village. One head of household in a state of drunkenness tempted fate by breaking the taboo of removing the layers of fabric fitted to clothe the oshirasama. He was soon afterward afflicted with a severe illness which was subsequently ascribed to oshirasama tatarì. Eventually, after taking remedial ritual action he recovered. As this incident carried no readily apparent political agenda it seemingly differs from the case of the curator.
35  The analogy of main house and branch house in regards to the roles of municipalities has been suggested by one regional political figure. MPR, 125.
Transcendental Political Action

— A Case of Oshirasama Tatari from the Tohoku Region —

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Abstract

The perception, or rather misperception that rural villages in Japan are places with minimal conflict, where citizens amicably join together for the betterment of the community, functions to impair our understanding of modern Japan. A bias may be formed wherein urban social settings will comparatively appear as inherently complex and anxiety filled environments. However, in actuality, rural communities maintain a definitive degree of tension as well, especially as regards interacting human relationships.

Based upon four years of fieldwork conducted in an agricultural village in northern Japan, I will discuss a worldview in which the belief in tatari (retribution) is called upon to help members of the community comprehend experiences and events that defy explanation.

Herein, a contemporary case of oshirasama tatari will be presented for examination. Although tatari references fractured relations held with the supernatural, embedded within the dramatic religious context may exist a political aspect that reflects a conflict within the community. In the course of this paper an attempt will be made to explore the effects of supernatural agency upon political action.