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*Gods of Medieval Japan*  
*Volume 1: The Fluid Pantheon*  
*Volume 2: Protectors and Predators*

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# A Review of *Gods of Medieval Japan*, Volumes 1 (*The Fluid Pantheon*) and 2 (*Protectors and Predators*)

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*Gods of Medieval Japan, Volume 1: The Fluid Pantheon* by Bernard Faure.  
Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015, xii + 496 pages, ISBN 978-0-8248-3933-8 (hardback), \$55.00.

*Gods of Medieval Japan, Volume 2: Protectors and Predators* by Bernard Faure.  
Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015, x + 512 pages, ISBN 978-0-8248-3931-4 (hardback), \$55.00.

Within the field of Esoteric Buddhism, one of the much-neglected areas of scholarship has been a precise and detailed discussion of a number of the deities involved. Bernard Faure's new project—titled *Gods of Medieval Japan*—seeks to address precisely this lacuna, focusing not only on the Esoteric Buddhist deities themselves, but also addressing their complex and interrelated transformations within medieval Japanese religious traditions. Rather than focusing on the great Esoteric buddhas, Faure's project instead emphasizes minor deities that often thrive along the pe-

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ripheries of Japanese Buddhism. Altogether, the discussion of deities throughout this project serves primarily as a means to dissect the myths and rituals of Esoteric Buddhism and explore their relation to medieval Japanese religious systems.

The two presently available volumes of Faure's opus are together comprised of fifteen chapters and more than 350 detailed illustrations—many of which are provided in full color. Each of the volumes begins with its own prologue and ends with its own coda, establishing a framework with which to categorize the specific deities described within each volume. The first volume, *The Fluid Pantheon*, is devoted to a number of complex deities who relate to an implicit Esoteric Buddhist pantheon. The second, *Protectors and Predators*, focuses on exactly that—though the deities explored in this volume are largely the Japanese reinterpretations of Indian *devas*.<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, nearly half of the content of *Protectors and Predators*—as we will see—revolves around the goddess Benzaiten (Skt. Sarasvatī).

The first chapter of this project is devoted largely to outlining Faure's theoretical approach to the study of Japanese divinities that will be utilized throughout the work. Every subsequent chapter focuses on an individual deity, or often, a group of deities—ones that have been conspicuously absent from studies of Japanese religion. Faure discusses these deities in meticulous detail, paying specific attention to numerous aspects of his subjects. Generally speaking, each of these deities are discussed with relation to their origins, literary and mythological interpretations, the development and evolution of their cults, their symbolic associations, their iconography, their frequent connection with embryological symbolism, and their relation to other religious traditions. This format, however, presents various difficulties for the reviewer. Faure's inspection of these deities is so finely detailed that a standard summary of most "deity" chapters would barely scratch the surface of the opus

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<sup>2</sup> The titles and subjects for subsequent volumes in this project have not yet been revealed.

and would thus prove uninformative to a reviewer's audience. Further, Faure's work is primarily an instructive reading of the sources rather than an analysis based on his own arguments. As such, for most chapters, I have made the decision to highlight the connections between various deities that Faure brings to light. Readers interested in the minutiae of any deity mentioned within this review are invited to consult the books.

In his first chapter, Faure details his theoretical approach, which is largely influenced by structuralism and post-structuralism, which he equates respectively to "cultivated spaces" and "the grass that grows in their interstices" (I: 49). More than either of these, however, his approach is particularly indebted to the actor-network theory pioneered by Bruno Latour, Michel Callon, and John Law. This theory focuses on the relationship between "actors" (in this case, deities), the network constructed by those relationships, and how it originates, develops, evolves, and transforms. Importantly, Faure notes how some of the deities discussed "hybrids" which is to say that they are like networks in and of themselves and are primarily definable by their relationships with other deities (I: 27-28). He further details the importance of symbological, ritual, and iconographical associations between these various deities.

The first deity treated by Faure, which is the subject of Chapter two, is the astral deity Myōken (Skt. Sudṛṣṭi), who is generally understood as a deified form of the pole star, and often identified with the Northern Dipper. Faure chiefly uses the symbolism of the "center" to discuss Myōken's prominence in Japanese ritual. He is compared to better-known buddhas such as Ichiji Kinrin (Skt. Ekākṣara-uṣṇīṣacakra) and Monju (Skt. Mañjuśrī) each prominently served in the centers of their own various *maṇḍalas*, paving the way for Myōken's own *maṇḍalas*. The Shintō kami Ame no Minakanushi is similarly invoked as a god of the center. Much is also made of Myōken's connection with the seven stars of the Northern Dipper and the symbolism of the number seven. Particularly interesting are Faure's references to Myōken's relationships with

Daoism (or alternately with Japanese Onmyōdō), both through Chinese beliefs regarding the pole star and Northern Dipper as well as through Chinese deities such as Xuanwu/Zhenwu, Siming, Silu, and Chintaku Reifujin. Another particular interest in this chapter is Myōken's strikingly diverse iconography. In this vast section, Faure explores the parallels between Myōken and a literal host of iconographically similar deities as diverse as Rokuji Myōō, the planet Venus, the planet Mercury, Benzaiten, Yakushi (Skt. Bhaiṣajyaguru), Suiten (Skt. Varuna), Kichijōten (Skt. Lakṣmī), Kannon (Skt. Avalokiteśvara), Rāhu, Enmaten (Skt. Yama), Taishakuten (Skt. Indra), Shinra Myōjin, Sannō Gongen, Kōjin, and Marishiten (Skt. Marīcī). Faure examines each of these similarities in as detailed a manner as possible, illustrating the vast interconnectedness of Myōken's network. With a network so complicated, it is no wonder that Myōken is the subject of Faure's longest chapter, at sixty-one pages.

Chapter three continues with the subject of the center, but with a new central deity, Fudō Myōō (Skt. Acala-vidyārāja). Fudō is the most popular of the Wisdom Kings, wrathful manifestations of the central Esoteric buddhas. Faure finds Fudō's likely origin in Vajrapāṇi, originally a yakṣa raised to one of the greater Esoteric Buddhist deities. Quite oppositely from the chapter on Myōken, Faure does not here illustrate a multi-deity network with Fudō at the center. Rather, Fudō's connections with only a few deities—such as the wisdom king Trailokyavijaya-vidyārāja, Kōjin, and Shōten (Skt. Vināyaka)—are explored. That is not to say that no Fudō-centered “network” appears in this chapter. Much of the chapter serves largely as a history of Fudō worship and ritual in Japan, and as a result, the network that Faure illustrates depicts Fudō's human adherents rather than deities with which he was equated. Faure does explore a number of Fudō's aspects, such as his various forms, the symbolism inherent in his iconography, and the importance of his acolytes. As Faure notes, Fudō is a particularly important deity not only in Esoteric Buddhism, but in the medieval Japanese religious tradition.

The third deity upon whom Faure centers is another Wisdom King, the so-called lord of lust, Aizen Myōō (Skt. Rāga-vidyārāja). As such, Aizen—the subject of chapter four—is associated with a number of sexualized practices. Faure explains his connections to a passage in the *Yiqi Jing* in which the buddha Mahāvairocana enters the so-called “horse penis *samādhi*.” He also discusses Aizen’s importance within the allegedly heretical branch of Shingon Buddhism known as the Tachikawa-Ryū. In general, Faure’s treatment of Aizen is similar to his treatment of Myōken in the second chapter, identifying a large network of deities with whom Aizen is associated. He is associated with Trailokyavijaya-vidyārāja, Myōken, Yama, Butsugen (Skt. Buddhalocana), Ichiji Kinrin, Amaterasu, and Jūichimen Kannon (Skt. Ekadaśamukha-Avalokiteśvara). His rituals themselves bear a further resemblance to those for Dakiniten (Skt. Dākinī), Shōten, and Benzaiten. Particularly important though are Aizen’s connection to specific symbols, such as the so-called “human yellow,” and the wish-fulfilling jewel (Skt. cintāmaṇi), which itself is the subject of chapter six. Aizen, similarly to his fellow wisdom king, Fudō, plays a critical part in the implicit pantheon that Faure uncovers—that of a *bona fide* Buddhist figure whose role borders on the transgressive.

Chapter five builds on the two previous chapters, centering on a “two-headed Aizen” that is perceived to be a combination of Aizen and his twin Zen’ai, or alternately Aizen and either Kongōsatta (Vajrasattva), Daishō Kongō, or even Fudō. Similar to the Fudō chapter, Faure largely restricts this chapter to the historical and ritual identification of these deities; the delineation of a network of various connections between deities is secondary. Several associations are briefly discussed, but not to the extent in the chapters on Myōken and Aizen. Faure’s emphasis on ritual identifications details a number of rituals and texts in which the two-headed Aizen appears. Particularly emphasized is the Sanzon Gōgyō ritual—which centers upon the triad of Aizen, Fudō, and Nyoirin Kannon (Skt. Cintāmaṇīcakra-Avalokiteśvara)—and similar triads in which Nyōirin Kannon is replaced by Kōjin or Amaterasu. While she is the center of this triad with Fudō and Aizen, Faure takes a brief tangent to explore a

network of deities centering on Amaterasu, among them, Memyō Bosatsu, Matouniang, Hayagrīva, Oshirasama, Enmaten, Taga Myōjin, and several others. Returning to Aizen, Faure then discusses ophidian forms of this deity, whom are associated with the snake deity Ugajin and certain forms of Benzaiten, both of whom are discussed in the second volume. This chapter is particularly important because it serves as an introduction to a number of “composite” or “hybrid deities” dealt with in *Gods of Medieval Japan*. While not abundant, these deities often play particularly significant roles in the Japanese religious tradition. The two-headed Aizen and its variants are no exception.

Rather than a particular deity, chapter six focuses on the popular image of the wish-fulfilling jewel (Skt. *cintāmaṇi*). Faure discusses the beginnings of this cult, which originated with the relics of the historical Buddha. In exploring rituals relating to this type of jewel, Faure further discusses three deities that have been encountered before: Aizen, Butsugen, and Ichiji Kinrin. Faure discusses the symbolism of the jewel, the popular idea of “twin jewels” (one buried on Mount Murō and another offered to retired emperor Shirakawa), and even the creation of artificial jewels. While the jewel itself is not precisely a deity, the network that Faure explores in this chapter demonstrates individual cults to the jewel and the persons and texts involved in expanding these cults. He focuses specifically on the jewel of Mount Murō and the cult of dragons already established there. Even various representations of Kūkai himself were worshiped in conjunction with jewels and dragons. Yet, the network of the wish-fulfilling jewel is even more extensive. Particularly interesting is that the wish-fulfilling jewel is not, properly speaking, a deity, however the symbol appears so widely in Japanese Buddhism that it almost serves as its own divine theme—a symbol that brings gods of differing types into a novel and implicit network.

Faure’s final chapter in *The Fluid Pantheon* brings the network of the wish-fulfilling jewel to its apex. Beginning with Nyoirin Kannon, Faure reestablishes the network around this deity, starting with Monju



and Kokūzō (Skt. Ākāśagarbha). Faure also introduces Uhō Dōji, who is also said to be an emanation of both Amaterasu and Kokūzō, but also related to Jizō (Skt. Kṣitigarbha), Venus, and even Kūkai himself. Once finished with discussions of Amaterasu, Faure turns to another *kami*, Hachiman, who is also related to the jewel, and became a manifestation of both Aizen and Amaterasu. The deities Benzaiten and Ugajin are reintroduced and their connections to the jewel are highlighted again. The chapter finalizes with the reintroduction of Nyoirin Kannon as well as a discussion of differing but relevant manifestations of Kannon (Skt. Avalokiteśvara). After a full exploration of Nyoirin Kannon's iconography, the deity's connections with Benzaiten, Ugajin, Inari, Dakiniten, Amaterasu, *nāgas*, and dragon deities are detailed. This chapter demonstrates that the wish-fulfilling jewel—now applied to actual deities—seems to cast these gods into a new, shared framework within which networks are transformed into complex webs of associations and identities.

*Protectors and Predators* picks up largely where *The Fluid Pantheon* left off, but with a virtually new cast of deities—most of them, Japanese interpretations of Indian *devas*. Its first chapter begins with Bishamonten (Skt. Vaiśravaṇa), Daikokuten (Skt. Mahākāla/Śiva), and Enmaten—all taken in some respect as chthonian gods. Unlike in earlier chapters, all three of these *devas* serve as the center of this chapter, so they are each explored in turn. Bushamonten is the guardian of the northern direction, and often perceived as a warrior god as well as a god of fortune. Daikokuten is an Esoteric form of Śiva that curiously includes aspects as a kitchen god and a god of fortune. Enmaten is the judge of the dead. Following each god is a description of its histories, evolutions, and symbologies. Bishamonten is networked with the gods Kubera, Pañcika, with Myōken, Jinja Daishō, Pṛthivī, Kichijōten, Benzaiten, and Gozu Tennō. Daikokuten is likewise associated with Kubera and Pañcika, as well as Kōjin, Kenrō Jijin, Sannō Gongen, Ōkuninushi, and Miwa Myōjin. Rather than gods with whom he is equated, Enmaten's network is composed of deities in his retinue. This entourage most commonly includes Citragupta, Kālarātrī, Mṛtyu, Cāmuṇḍa, Godō Daijin, Shōten, Jizō, and others. Each

of these gods—at least to some degree—was perceived as a ruler of human destiny in addition to having chthonic attributes. While deities such as Enmaten are well known as chthonic deities and rulers of human destiny, it is interesting to see deities like Bishamonten and Daikokuten—generally seen as gods of fortune—brought into that fold.

Mentioned in the section on Enmaten in the first chapter, Shōten is then brought into the spotlight. Shōten is an elephant-headed deity whose prime function is the removal of obstacles, though in some incarnations, he is also treated as a god of obstacles. Shōten is often associated with Skanda (the god of war and his half-brother), with whom they share further affiliations with the Navagrahas, the Seven Mothers (Skt. *Māṛkas*), and *Cāmuṇḍa*. Shōten's own network involves associations with a wide variety of deities, including Kōjin, Ugajin, Aizen, Amaterasu, Sarutahiko, Jūzenji, Enmaten, Bishamonten, Marishiten, Benzaiten, Inari, Myōken, and Gozu Tennō, among others. One particularly interesting aspect with regard to Shōten is his centralization within Japanese medieval divination board rituals. Also of interest is his composite form, the dual-bodied Kangiten, in which Shōten and is pictured embracing a twin. This form seems to have no precursor in China or India, despite the wide interest in Shōten. As such, this speaks to an implicit need within the Japanese pantheon for composite deities like the dual-headed Aizen discussed in *The Fluid Pantheon*. Kangiten is merely the beginning, however. As the medieval period continued, the interest in composite deities clearly increased, as we shall see in subsequent chapters.

Dakiniten is the subject of chapter three. Technically not an Indian *deva*, this deity is the medieval Japanese deification of an Indian *dākinī*—originally indicating a voluptuous flesh-eating young woman. The deity, however, is pictured as a standard Buddhist deity, though often pictured atop a white fox. Dakiniten is associated primarily with foxes and secondarily to the wish-fulfilling jewel in Japan. However, as far as deities are concerned, the deity is connected with Amaterasu, Inari, Monju, Aizen, Nyoirin Kannon, Benzaiten, Ugajin, Shinra Myōjin,

Bishamonten, Izuna Gongen, and especially Benzaiten. Dakiniten is a particularly interesting case as it is with this deity that we first seem to discover a Japanese construction of a purportedly Indian *deva*. Not to mention one that was often believed to steal the vitality from human beings. Yet, such a deity becomes a cornerstone of Buddhist rituals, even those relating to the enthronement of an emperor, and the connection to foxes led to its integration with the well-known *kami*, Inari. Notably, just as Shōten in the previous chapter, Dakiniten also came to command a certain importance as the subject of medieval Japanese divination board rituals.

Faure's next two chapters focus on the river goddess Benzaiten, (also known as Myōonten). In medieval Japanese religion, Benzaiten presided largely over the domains of war and music. Chapter four discusses her evolution, and describes several associations within an early network—such as water deities, gandharvas, and draconic creatures such as *nāgas*. Benzaiten's evolution is in part due to originally unrelated deities such as Myōon Bosatsu (Skt. Gadgadasvara). Her network includes Daikokuten, Daikiniten, Bishamonten, Amaterasu, Aizen, Dōsojin, and Suiten, among others. Notably, despite being associated with war, she is given a new explicit network as one of Japan's Seven Gods of Fortune (of which Bishamonten and Daikokuten are also members). Chapter five extends this discussion, exploring the eventual evolution of Benzaiten into the composite deity Uga Benzaiten, a hybrid of Benzaiten and Ugajin (the latter of whom is the subject of chapter 7). Faure relates Ugajin to the image of the Chinese gods Fu Xi and Nü Wa as demi-serpents with interlocked tails, but reminds that Benzaiten is not simply a manifestation of Ugajin. Rather, they are a dyad, very similar to the dual Kangiten. Faure also discusses the main cultic centers of Benzaiten and their local contributions to the evolution of this deity, paying particular attention to her draconic and/or ophidian attributes. Particularly interesting in this regard is her retinue of fifteen attendants and their potential relation to the demonic brood of Hārītī, as well as Benzaiten's role as an earth goddess. While Ugajin has yet to be discussed in full, much of this chapter

demonstrates a medieval Japanese trend towards the creation of composite deities, a trend that arguably reaches an apex in the following chapter.

The discussion regarding Benzaiten continues in Chapter six, in which Faure describes a composite deity known as “the Three-Deva deity.” This hybrid god is a fox-riding multi-armed manifestation with the heads of Benzaiten, Dakiniten, and Shōten—each of whom served as the subject of a previous chapter in *Protectors and Predators*. While the deity has no clear origin, Faure notes that it may well relate to the triad of Nyoirin Kannon, Aizen, and Fudō, discussed in *The Fluid Pantheon*. The triad of deities appears in a number of scrolls with different variations, some of which include Ugajin. Additional deities were added to these scrolls, resulting in a number of complex Three-Deva deity *maṇḍalas*. Some of these *maṇḍalas* contain a greater number of deities. Others illustrate the Three-Deva deity with variations regarding their positions. Yet, it is here that one of the more unbelievable facets of medieval Japanese religion emerges. Of note in this respect are the images of Tenkawa Benzaiten: images of the Three-Deva deity, but with the heads of the three *devas* replaced by snakes (or perhaps dragons). Other figures in these *maṇḍalas* are inexplicably drawn with animalistic features whether ophidian, vulpine, or relating to other animals entirely. Examination of this complex but truly hybrid deity leads Faure to examine other similar deities—such as the three-faced Daikokuten and the three-faced Bishamonten. He notes that this paradigm evades clear explanation due to the interconnection of a number of aspects from which it is derived. Interestingly enough, thus far, *Gods of Medieval Japan* has systematically explored the medieval trend to hybridize deities, beginning with the simple dual-headed Aizen, and reaching its veritable apex with the extremely unusual Tenkawa Benzaiten.

Chapter seven centers on Ugajin, the serpent god that relates specifically to foxes, snakes, and the god Inari. However, Ugajin is so closely associated with Benzaiten that the name Ugajin can often refer to

forms of either deity, even though there are many cases in which they are both distinctly separate. Often possessing the face of an old man, Ugajin is also related to the figure of the *okina* in Japan. Ugajin is further identified with Dakiniten, Myōken, Jūzenji, Daikokuten, Suwa Daimyōjin, Toyouke, and Kōjin. Faure notes that despite a number of Shintō identifications, it is clear that they cannot be the cause of this god's origin; instead, he is an Esoteric Buddhist deity. Ugajin is affiliated with the wish-fulfilling jewel, and thus becomes a god of prosperity and a controller of human destinies as well. He was also particularly central to the cult at Suwa during the medieval period. As an ophidian deity, Ugajin is particularly unique in the Japanese religious landscape, but Faure is able to contextualize this abnormality within the broader Asian religious culture as well as demonstrate how a figure such as Ugajin could become an important part of Esoteric Buddhist ritual.

Faure's final chapter focuses on the particularly fluid and multifaceted god known as Matarajin. Faure outlines a number of his functions, namely as a god of obstacles, a protector, a pestilence god, and a patron of the performing arts. He is related to Sekizan Myōjin, Shinra Myōjin, Daikokuten, the Seven Mothers, Taizan Fukun, Susanoo, Gozu Tennō, Konpira, and as Faure notes, he may potentially relate to Shōten by way of the Seven Mothers. In discussing Matarajin, Faure explores the histories of Sekizan Myōjin and Shinra Myōjin in detail. Each of these deities plays an active role in the legacy of the monks Ennin and Enchin respectively—each Japanese pilgrims to China. While Sekizan Myōjin is related to Taizan Fukun and Myōken, Shinra Myōjin relates back to Matarajin, Myōken, Susanoo, Gozu Tennō, Dakiniten, as well as numerous others. Matarajin's role as a pestilence deity is particularly of interest, as his network expanded to include the *kami* Susanoo and the Onmyōdō deity Gozu Tennō, both of which are well-known examples of *kōjin*. Yet, Matarajin is also particularly emblematic as an *ena kōjin* or placenta god. Of all the gods explored thus far, likely Matarajin possesses the largest traceable network of associations—or of networks themselves. It is perhaps more accurate to describe Matarajin's associations as

a vast interconnected web of networks through which initially unrelated deities can thus find some connection. It is with this unique and enigmatic figure that Faure concludes his second volume.

As a whole, the two initial volumes of *Gods of Modern Japan* provides a stunning look at the vast networks of deities within medieval Japanese religion, tying together a wide variety of threads into a large interconnected web. Gods of obstacles, embryological gods, chthonic gods, gods of the center, gods relating to animals, hybrid gods, and many more are all woven together here—their connections unearthed largely for the first time in English. At its core, *Gods of Medieval Japan* is a monumental undertaking, a veritable treasury of encyclopedic knowledge regarding these gods.

The one major weakness in Faure's analysis is one that he himself clearly acknowledges in the prologue: "I have chosen to focus here on esoteric myths and rituals, and especially on their constant change and resilience. In order to bring their logic and dynamics to light, I have had to consider them in the *longue durée*. The disadvantage of such an approach is, of course, that I have not always provided a sociohistorical context as thick as specialists of this or that particular period might desire." (I: 6). While Faure certainly brings together a veritable treasure trove of information, images, and sources, he largely brings together a number of related sources, reports what the sources state, and provides chronological context when available. Rarely does he pit one source against its biases, its contexts, or its peers in order to tease out new ideas regarding the natures of the gods themselves, or any new temporal or causal contexts for them.

If sources state that two deities are associated in some way, then Faure reports it and analyzes both gods in meticulous detail. However, the questions of why and how any two deities became associated—as well as which groups equated them and for what reasons—are often left unanswered unless the sources at least imply an ideological or doctrinal answer. To be fair, based on the sheer number of gods that Faure analyz-

es throughout the course of the two books published thus far, such additional context would largely call for a third book in and of itself. Many of these deities—even the minor ones—are deserving of monographs in their own right. As such, there are bound to be omissions, and Faure himself admitted this same omission in his own prologue to the work. Thankfully, *Gods of Medieval Japan* does not suffer from the omission of this context; on the contrary, it stands perfectly well even without it. However, some readers will no doubt seek answers to these questions that *Gods of Medieval Japan* does not yet answer. While Faure's work will no doubt open the doors of the medieval Japanese pantheon to a great number of academics and scholars, there is certainly more work that remains to be done.