

From *Kami* to *Okina*
—A Study on the Fundamental Beliefs of Japanese Culture—

YAMAORI Tetsuo

Originally, the Japanese god (*Kami*) was an invisible deity but after the 8th century to the 9th century (Nara-Heian period) it assumed the shape of an aged man (*okina*) in mythological legends and legendary literature. The invisible god donned the mask of an *okina*, appeared into this world, delivered oracles and made predictions. About the same time, images of gods were produced. A notable fact is that one of the oldest images found of a god possesses the features of an old man. In Japan, Buddhism exerted a deep influence on the production of divine figures, but images of Buddha scarcely took the shape of an old man. At the beginning of the Heian period the facial expressions of a god assuming the features of an *okina* were developed from the *okina* masks in the Noh plays that were perfected by Zeami during medieval times and eventually formed a typical pattern. Moreover, the fact that the *okina* mask appearing in the Noh plays was handed down as the mask of god, corresponds well with the meaning of the *okina* as a godly symbol in the legends previously mentioned.

A study of the legends of the *okina* in historical literature shows that the origin could be traced to the genology of *yamanokami* (mountain god) and *uminokami* (sea god). They sometimes helped in human crisis, gave knowledge, set ethical examples to people and imparted revelation. In other words, this was a mediator between the will of the gods, spirits and the human world. They appeared to the human world through spirits possession and this tendency shows its profound shamanistic character.

The *okina* that appears in ancient literature takes the figure of an ordinary man as well as priest; this shows that it was a divine reality belonging to a liminal area that covered beliefs in god as well as Buddha.

God assuming the shape of an *okina*, respected as both god and man as according to the legends, reflects the Japanese belief towards ideal aging, quite different from the Western ideology. Old age is a period that symbolizes tragedy, disgrace and despair, but also it is a period that reflects humanity consisting of unselfish wisdom; innocent childishness and vigorousness. The divine image that ancient Japanese tried to attach to the icon of the *okina* seems to exert a strong influence on our basic ethnic consciousness.