

The Transformation of Deities in the Ritual

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The Buddhistic Mass (Shuni-e) held at the Nigatsudo within the Todaiji-temple has been regarded as one of the oldest masses, dating to the Nara period (8th century). Two images of Avalokitesvara, great and small, enshrined in the Nigatsudo have been kept in each feretory and no one has ever been permitted to see them directly. In this paper I describe what I would like to call the process of "de-incarnation" of a Buddhistic image.

Although the Shuni-e mass had been held as a ceremony of repentance and expiation in february every year, it took on a new character in the medieval ages. Then the midnight ritual centered on the smaller Avalokitesvara image came into being. This smaller image that had been enshrined within the inner sanctum was moved into an outer praying chamber from its usual place in the feretory and was worshipped. What is worthy of note here is that the smaller esoteric and Buddhistic Avalokitesvara has thus come to be worshipped as if it is a kami (Shintoistic deity). Thus we can safely state that kami worship of Shintoistic ritual was newly added to the Buddhistic mass. In other words a sort of religious syncretism developed in the form of the de-incarnation of the Buddhistic icon.

Meanwhile the great Kasuga shrine lies also in the adjacent area to the Nigatsudo where the Shuni-e mass is held. While Shomu Tenno, the famous emperor of Nara period, built the Todaiji temple, it was Fujiwara-uji, the most powerful clan of the contemporary ruling class, who built the great Kasuga shrine. Although the deity of Kasuga was enshrined as a guardian deity of Fujiwara clan at the beginning, the ritual of the Kasuga festival has changed its character since medieval ages. A new festival evolved featuring a new deity called Wakamiya. In this festival the image of the deity was first moved out from its usual place in the main temple to a special temporary one, and then moved back again at midnight. This replaced the original festival of Kasuga in which the official visit and offering by members of the Fujiwara clan to Kasuga

shrine had been performed with a splendid procession since the Nara period.

In sum, the Buddhistic ritual of the Todaiji temple (Shuni-emass) centered on the worship of the smaller Avalokitesvara can be supposed to have been affected by the ritual of the Wakamiya festival of Kasuga, resulting in the de-incarnation of Buddhistic image, the transformation of the smaller Avalokitesvara from a Buddhistic icon into the entity of a Shintoistic deity. It can be said that this transformation is an example of the traditional process of syncretism whereby the worship of kami (Shintoistic deities) and hotoke (Buddhistic deities) merged gradually in Japan.